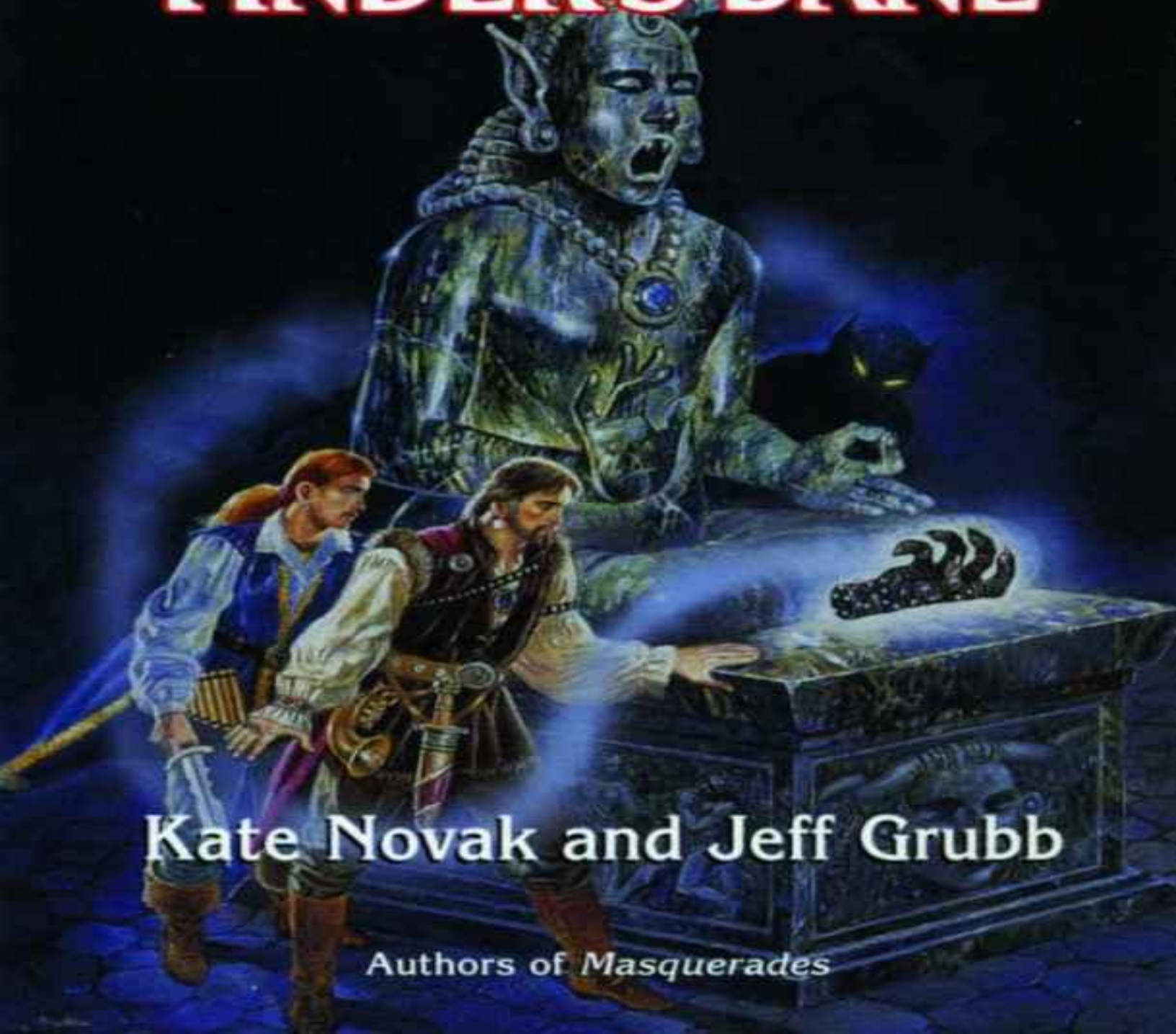


The Harpers



FINDER'S BANE



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Lost Gods Series
Book 1

Finder's Bane
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One
The Rescue

Joel turned his horse from the paved Northride Road onto the muddy Tethyamar Trail. The bard halted and watched with some reluctance as the caravan moved past him up the road toward Shadowdale. A shrine built by the followers of the god Torm stood at the juncture of the road and the trail. With its walls of stone and thatched roof the shrine doubled as a way station for travelers who couldn't reach Shadowdale by nightfall. It was too early in the day and the weather far too fair for any of the merchants of the caravan to halt here. They were intent on pushing on to their markets in the north.

One of the caravan guards guided his horse forward until it stood beside the bard's. The guard, a Dalesman named Branson, was a grizzled twenty-year veteran of the road. He was always uncomfortable watching someone ride away from the safety of his caravan, especially someone as alone and young as Joel was.

Branson had to admit the bard wasn't exactly a boy. Joel had the muscular physique of a man and the sober demeanor of an adult, but the caravan guard could detect the signs of youth in him. The bard's long red hair had the sheen of a child's, and after ten days without a shave, his beard was still sparse, though his mustache stood out well enough. More telling was the way the young man's blue eyes widened with every new vista. He wasn't, Branson judged, a seasoned traveler.

"Change o' heart, lad?" the guard asked hopefully.

The younger man shook his head. "No. The trail through Daggerdale is the only way to the Lost Vale, and that's where I'm determined to go."

"I didn't exaggerate the dangers, lad. The trail's ridden with giant spiders and wolves and orcs and bandits and Zhentish scum, and the Daggerdale folk are none too friendly neither," Branson warned.

"I'm ready for some adventure," the bard declared.

The caravan guard snorted derisively and replied, "You're young yet. You'll grow out of it."

The young bard grinned but was wise enough not to argue. He stared after the tail end of the caravan with which he'd traveled all the way from Cormyr. "I'm going to miss your singing," he said.

Branson roared with laughter. "You're going to miss your audience, you mean," he teased.

The bard lowered his eyes self-consciously.

"Aye, bard. Nothing to be ashamed of. You're a man who likes people. That's a good thing. And a man who likes entertaining them. That's an even better thing."

"I don't think I've ever been so entertained as I was by the verses you made up to that campfire song—especially the one about the drunken mind flayer," Joel said. "You have a gift for verse."

Branson chuckled. "No wonder the church o' Milil don't like you bards becoming Finder priests. Encouraging an old fool like me to write songs—competing with the likes o' you."

"Music doesn't belong only to bards," Joel insisted. "Nor any art just to the learned. Art belongs to everyone. People can create it or change it any way they want. . . . Promise me you'll keep making new songs," the bard said sincerely.

"Aye. I'll do that, if you promise to come back to hear 'em, so's I know you made it through."

"Deal," Joel agreed with a nod.

"But now you've got to be moving on, haven't you?" Branson asked. "Once knew a halfling bard who had a

saying—always leave 'em wantin' more." He stuck out his hand.

Joel grasped the old man's meaty wrist with his own slender hand and smiled as the guard reached out with his other hand and squeezed his forearm reassuringly.

"Thanks for the good company. Safe journey," Joel said.

"Safe journey yourself," Branson retorted. "You'll be needing it more than I. Be off with you, then." He slapped Joel's mare on the rear.

The horse kicked once and trotted down the trail a few yards before slowing uncertainly.

Joel turned in his saddle to wave farewell, but the guard had already taken off after his caravan.

"Hai, Butternut!" the bard called out to his mount, urging her forward. The mare, no doubt relieved to have finally escaped the crush of the caravan wagons and pleased to have soft dirt beneath her hooves, took off down the trail without complaint.

The noise of the caravan quickly faded in the distance. Soon the Spiderhaunt Woods began to close in about the trail, muffling all sound. The woods were composed mainly of oak and evergreen trees growing very close together, their tangled branches creaking as they rubbed against one another. The undergrowth was dense with vines and saplings and fallen trees. Sticky cobwebs brushed at Joel's face, but fortunately there was no sign of the giant spiders that gave the woods its name. Occasionally some tiny creature rustled in the brush, and overhead birds chirped busily, but otherwise it was quiet on the trail. After days of traveling with a crowd of merchants, talking deals and markets, the bard welcomed the peace. Miles later, though, the stillness began to feel eerie to Joel.

He started humming softly to himself. A short while later he was singing "Market Day," a song he'd written as an apprentice and had earned his former master a fat purse from a delighted merchants' guild. He began softly, but

soon, pleased with his own skill and determined to fill the void of sound all about him, his voice swelled.

He was just belting out the final repeat of the refrain when his mare slowed and then halted in her tracks, her ears pricked up high, her nostrils flaring, the skin on her neck quivering. Joel stood up in the stirrups and peered down the trail, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. He nudged the beast's flanks, but she responded by turning away, heading back the way they'd come.

"What's got into you, girl?" the bard muttered as he pulled up on her reins.

Butternut stopped and stood still.

Joel pulled hard on her left rein, but she stubbornly shook her head and whinnied with annoyance.

Remembering Branson's warning about wolves, the bard realized the mare might have reason to balk. He dismounted and pulled Butternut's bridle toward him until he stood eye to eye with the mare. He stroked her muzzle and sang a lullaby softly into her ear: "Courage will wash away your fear, whatever evil may be near." Joel repeated the verse over and over until a sense of safety and well-being swept through him; then Butternut snorted and her muscles relaxed. Holding the mare's bridle, the bard led her back up the trail a few paces. She followed obediently, without qualms.

Joel snapped a lead rope on the bridle and walked beside his mount. The trail began to climb upward, and the woods began to take on a different appearance. The trees grew farther apart, and the undergrowth was more sparse. The ground was rockier, strewn with moss-covered boulders of great size, some larger than a man.

The bard tried to remain alert to any sign of what had spooked Butternut, but his thoughts were distracted by memories that made him uneasy.

He'd learned the courage verse on the day he had agreed to become a priest of Finder. It was one of many spells the

priest Jedidiah had taught him after anointing him. Joel knew he was lucky to have found Jedidiah; priests of Finder were almost unheard of. Finder was a new god, a force for renewal and change in all things, but especially in art. Steeped from birth in the traditions of lore and music, Joel yearned for a rebirth in his art.

Yet the calling to Finder's priesthood had not come easily. It had angered Joel's masters, annoyed his friends, and embarrassed his family. More importantly, it frightened him. With joy and pride, he'd trained as a bard from childhood and attained his master's ring at a remarkably young age. Now it was hard to let go of the title.

Jedidiah had somehow understood Joel's fear of starting all over again, of trading the security and honor of his position for the role of a priest. "For now, you can call yourself the Rebel Bard," the old priest had told him, chuckling at the title. Finder had been known as the Nameless Bard in the days before he'd become a god.

"You're going to have to face it, Joel," he muttered to himself. "You've been casting priest spells. You're a priest now."

Butternut nickered softly and stopped. Joel halted beside her. Now he could hear what her more sensitive ears must have heard earlier—the clash of steel against steel. Somewhere in the woods to the east someone—several someones—were battling with swords. Joel spied a narrow path leading in the direction of the noise.

The young priest pulled his mare off the trail and tied her to a low branch. Magically reassured, the beast commenced to graze on the undergrowth. The bard pulled up the hood of his green cloak and drew his sword before he began moving stealthily down the path toward the sounds of battle.

The trees on either side of the path grew more sparse, and Joel could make out figures in a clearing up ahead. The bard ducked behind a tree and peered around the trunk to assess the situation.

In the center of the clearing stood a granite boulder over eight feet high and thirty feet around. Five armed men had cornered a lone swordswoman up against the rock. From the black and yellow badges sewn on their leather jerkins, Joel could tell that the men were Zhentilar, soldiers of the Zhentarim, the Black Network.

Branson had warned Joel about them. The Zhentarim shipped their honest goods down the Northride Road through Shadowdale, but there were certain goods that Shadowdale's lord, its wizard, and its people would not stomach. These included mercenaries, arms, and slaves, which the Zhentarim was forced to bring through Daggerdale. To protect this illicit trade, the Black Network sent soldiers to patrol Daggerdale by leave of the puppet rulers it had set up in the town of Dagger Falls. The Zhentilar, Branson had explained, were a menace to any goods not belonging to their masters and harassed travelers on principle. The Zhentilar in the clearing weren't much older than Joel, but they were all armed with swords, and their eyes were cold and pitiless.

Their chosen prey of the moment was barely more than a girl, barefoot and dressed in a long skirt and a tunic, both woven from brown wool. A small leather backpack hung from her left arm, serving as a shield. If not for the cutlass she wielded in her right hand, Joel might have taken her for a Dalelands shepherdess. Considering her dark skin and short bushy hair and the curved blade, Joel wondered if perhaps she was an askara, a fighting woman from one of the southern empires. Whatever her origins, she was certainly no stranger to combat.

Two Zhentilar already lay on the ground. One was a soldier with a fatal gash across his throat, while the other was a spellcaster with a dagger in his chest. Despite having felled two of her seven attackers, the swordswoman was hard pressed now. With her back against the boulder, she couldn't be surrounded easily, but neither could she escape.

Although three of the five surviving Zhentilar hung back, they made an effective fence of steel behind the other two soldiers, who harried her like dogs who had cornered a fox. Blood seeped from several small cuts on her arms, and she appeared to be tiring. From time to time, she let the point of her sword droop carelessly. It was only a matter of time before she would make some fatal error.

There was no question in the bard's mind that he would help the young woman. He would have liked to ponder until he could come up with a foolproof plan, but there wasn't time. Certainly the odds weren't favorable for a bold assault. That left deceit. Joel grinned as a wild scheme took shape in his head.

According to Branson, the Zhentilar were used to taking orders from their mages. With its mage captain felled, this patrol was obviously in need of new leadership. Joel waved his fingers about his body, chanting a simple illusion spell to mimic the outfit of the dead Zhentimar wizard. The fabric of his cloak shimmered until he appeared to be wearing black and yellow robes emblazoned with a Zhentimar badge. With the same spell, he covered his face with the illusion of a long gray beard and cloaked his sword with the shape of an oaken staff.

Taking a deep breath, Joel stepped into the clearing. One of the Zhentilar had climbed up the back of the boulder and now teetered precariously near the edge, intending to drop a large rock onto the swordswoman's head. Before the situation got any messier, Joel barked, "What's going on here? Soldier, report!"

The two soldiers battling the swordswoman kept their attention fixed on their foe, but the two in the rear whirled about, leveling their swords at Joel. The Zhentilar atop the boulder lost his footing and tumbled backward with a startled cry. It took all Joel's self-control to keep from laughing.

Reacting to the sight of a Zhentilar mage-captain, one soldier before Joel lowered his sword and snapped back, "Sir, we were interrogating this civilian when she murdered our captain and lieutenant, sir!"

"I can see that," Joel replied coldly. "I could feel the death of my brother mage." The bard strode solemnly over to the dead mage's body and bent over to assure himself the mage was indeed dead. From the corpse's belt, he retrieved a small wand.

As he stood, Joel pointed the wand at the swordswoman. The two Zhentilar facing him backed away hurriedly. Apparently the wand's magic wasn't something to trifle with. Too bad I don't have a clue what it does, Joel thought.

"Back away from your prisoner, men," the bard ordered the Zhentilar guarding the woman.

The two remaining guards backed away with more calm. From the smug look on their faces, Joel could tell they were looking forward to watching their prey become the target of whatever foul magic the wand released. The color drained from the young woman's face, and her lips moved in what Joel guessed must be a prayer to her gods.

"Sheathe your sword," he ordered her.

Like a sleepwalker, the prisoner obeyed.

Joel stepped closer.

"Careful, sir," one soldier muttered. "That's how our captain got skewered, thinkin' she was pacified. Best flame her and be done with it."

"Did it occur to you, soldier," Joel asked with a sneer, "that if she went to all this trouble to avoid answering your questions, she must know something important? We need to question her."

The bard strode up to the swordswoman, the wand pointed at her belly. She was nearly as tall as he was, but standing this close, the bard could see she was even younger than he'd thought. She was really just a girl. A

brave girl, though—she met his look with a defiant glare. In another instant, Joel sensed, she would attack him.

Joel winked. The girl's eyes widened momentarily, but she said nothing. Joel slipped the wand in his belt, grabbed the girl's arm, and yanked her away from the rock. Noting the soldiers' curious stares, he jerked his head in the direction of the corpses and ordered, "Do something with those bodies!"

"Yes, sir," one of the soldiers answered. "Moonteeth, get the shovel. Kurlens, fetch the captain a piece of rope for the prisoner."

"That won't be necessary," Joel replied, steering the girl toward the path. "I'm sure I can handle her."

"Where are you taking her, sir?" the soldier giving orders asked suspiciously.

"My patrol is waiting at the end of the path," the bard lied. "I'll interrogate her there. Join us when you're finished cleaning up here." He continued to guide the girl down the path, careful not to look back.

His coolness didn't fool the soldiers. Two Zhentilar followed Joel, and although he couldn't see them, the bard was acutely aware that their blades were pointed at his back.

"Begging your pardon, sir," the soldier who'd taken charge said craftily, "but I can't relinquish the prisoner without you giving me the password."

Password. That's just great, Joel thought with annoyance.

The bard released his grip on the girl's arm. He gave her a quick shove forward, making room for him to whirl about with his staff raised. The first soldier, unaware that the staff was merely an illusion covering a sharpened sword, grabbed at the weapon with his bare hand. Blood spurted from what was left of the man's fingers as he shrieked in pain.

Joel stepped back, parrying the second soldier's blade with his own. The force of steel smashing into steel dispelled the illusion of the mage staff.

"You're no mage!" the second soldier growled. He slammed his blade at the bard's sword with enough force to knock it from Joel's hand. Joel retreated several hasty steps backward. The soldier advanced on him with an evil grin. From behind him, Joel heard a twang. A moment later the grin disappeared from the soldier's face as a crossbow bolt buried itself in his throat.

Joel spun about. His "prisoner" was already sliding a second bolt into a one-handed drow crossbow. The bard snatched his sword up from the ground and retreated to the girl's side.

The girl stepped forward, leveling her cutlass at the soldier with the injured hand. Joel grabbed her arm. "Come on. Let's go!" he ordered.

"We should finish them off," she argued.

"Don't push your luck," the bard growled, tugging hard on her arm.

The girl dashed down the path at Joel's side. There was no sound of pursuit behind them, but they didn't stop until they reached Joel's mare.

Butternut nickered nervously as Joel untied her lead rope.

"Who are you?" the girl asked.

"The Rebel Bard," Joel said, making a courtly, albeit hurried, bow. "At your service, my lady."

The girl laughed, though Joel couldn't tell exactly why. "I'm Holly," she replied as she sheathed her cutlass. "Holly Harrowslough. Your service is much appreciated." Her accent marked her as a native of the northern dales, and she held her hand out in dales fashion.

Joel grasped the girl's wrist as she grasped his. Her brief grip was strong and sure, and her smile quite pretty, but there was something about the way her dark eyes held his that made the bard feel awkward, as if he'd just confessed to some crime and was being judged.

"We'd better keep moving," Joel insisted. He turned away hastily, making a show of tightening the strap on Butternut's

saddle.

"You don't have to escort me," Holly said. "The Zhents don't usually bother me. It's just that this patrol's captain spotted me in Shadowdale last week, so he was overly suspicious. The other patrols won't suspect me. And you'll be safer if you aren't seen cavorting with the natives."

Joel's forehead furrowed with concern. "Look, I know we're perfect strangers, but I can't just leave you here alone. I'm sure there must be a rule that forbids it. Thou shalt not abandon maidens in distress' or some such."

Holly laughed.

"Besides," Joel continued hurriedly, "I could use someone who's familiar with the area. I'm going north, and if it's not out of your way, I'd appreciate your guidance."

"Well, then, Rebel Bard, you've got yourself a guide," the girl agreed with a grin.

Joel swung up into the saddle and offered Holly a hand. She swung up behind him easily. Butternut snorted with annoyance at the extra weight. "It's just till we put some distance between us and them, girl," the bard assured the horse, urging her forward with a nudge.

They had traveled all of a hundred yards when they heard the sound of horses on the trail behind them. Someone shouted something about spies. Joel kicked Butternut into a trot.

"Blast!" Holly muttered as she looked back.

"What is it?" Joel asked, his rear view blocked by the girl.

"A fresh Zhent patrol, mounted. And one of the ones we left behind in the clearing is waving them in our direction."

Joel bit his lip, trying to formulate a plan. Butternut, he realized, could never outrun the Zhentilar loaded down as she was.

"I'm going to dismount and hold them off," Joel said, kicking his foot out of the stirrup. "You keep going."

"You can't—" Holly started to protest, but Joel had already swung his leg over the mare's neck and fallen to the ground.

Joel rolled out of the way of the mare's hind legs and leapt to his feet. Drawing his sword, he prepared to make a heroic last stand, but Holly had other ideas. She had turned Butternut about and ridden back to the bard's side.

"You know," Joel growled with exasperation, "there's not much point in my trying to save your life if you insist on being killed with me," he said.

"What kind of guide would I be if I lost you to the Zhents?" Holly retorted grimly as she loaded a bolt into her crossbow.

From a pocket of his tunic, Joel pulled out a tiny vial of holy water. Not even the urgency of the situation overcame the awkwardness he felt praying aloud. With his head bowed with embarrassment, he whispered his prayer. "Finder, help us through this peril." He splashed the holy water first in Holly's direction, then on his own feet. When he'd pocketed the empty vial, he raised his sword again. Even with the blessing, the sword felt uncomfortably heavy in his hand. He had only the most rudimentary training in its use in Berdusk. Since then he'd had little inclination to practice and few reasons to use it.

The Zhentilar were closing fast when Holly shouted, "Hey!"

Joel looked up at the girl. She was trying to bat away a bird that fluttered about her shoulder. The bird landed on Butternut's head. Joel could see that it was a jackdaw, its purplish black wings glittering even in the shadow of the trees.

Joel froze with anticipation. Among the advice Jedidiah had given him before they had parted was to listen to the birds.

The bird looked straight at Joel and cocked its head. Turn the peril back at them," the bird croaked. "Use the wand of their mage. With Lady Luck's blessing, you cannot fail."

Holly's eyes widened with surprise, but she didn't forget the approaching enemy. "Can you really use the wand?" she

asked excitedly.

From his belt, Joel drew the wand he'd stolen from the Zhentilar mage's corpse. It was fashioned from mahogany and polished smooth all around, save for a symbol engraved at the tip and inlaid with mother-of-pearl. The symbol was an ancient rune signifying chaos. That could be the word that activated it, but what the wand did the bard couldn't even guess. It was also entirely possible the wand wouldn't respond to someone who lacked formal training and only dabbled in magic. He looked up questioningly at the jackdaw. The bird cawed loudly and fluttered off into the trees above.

"I don't know if I can get it to work," Joel whispered up to Holly, "but I can always bluff." He took up a position in the center of the trail and held the wand out at arm's length. The Zhentilar thundered down the trail single file.

"Halt!" he shouted, aiming the wand at the lead rider of the patrol. "Halt, or I'll use the wand!"

The rider did not halt, and Joel thought he could see the man smiling.

"Fine. You asked for it," the bard muttered. "Chaos!" he shouted.

A pulse of blue light issued from the tip of the wand and struck the Zhentilar's sword. The weapon began to glow with a vivid blue light as the soldier closed on Joel. With a yell, the Zhentilar swung his blade downward. The bard raised his own sword to fend off the blow, but the blow never struck. The Zhentilar's blade passed right through the bard's weapon like a ghost. In the next instant, the enemy's sword vanished entirely.

With unerring aim, Holly put a crossbow bolt through the rider's chest. As his horse passed by, she grabbed the beast's reins and pushed the soldier from the saddle.

Undeterred by the fate of their comrade, the other Zhentilar continued charging toward the bard and the girl.

"Some people never learn," Joel said with a sigh. Once more he pointed the wand at the approaching foe and called out the command word.

A sphere of light, buttery yellow like bright sunshine, bubbled from the tip of the wand. When the sphere of light had grown as large as a pumpkin, a large butterfly fluttered forth. The insect was beautifully marked with orange and black spots and was as large as Joel's hand. A second butterfly emerged, then a dozen, then hundreds of butterflies swarmed out of the sphere of light. The mass of beating wings blinded the bard and startled Butternut and the dead soldier's horse into flight down the trail. Holly shouted as Butternut carried her away.

The Zhentilar patrol's horses must have been equally startled, for Joel could hear them neighing in panic, and none of them came bursting through the cloud of orange and black. Joel backed away from the colorful swarm. The butterflies began spiraling upward toward the tree-tops, and Joel could see beyond their fluttering wings. The Zhentarim soldiers were getting their mounts back under control and moving in his direction.

Joel realized now the meaning of the command word etched on the wand. The wand's magic was determined by chaos, completely random. He understood now what the jackdaw had meant about Lady Luck's favor. To tip the odds in his favor, he needed luck.

"Tymora," he whispered, invoking the goddess of luck, who had always been a friend to his own god, Finder. "Smile on this fool." He aimed the wand for a third time and called out, "Chaos!"

Either the third use was truly charmed or the bard's request of Lady Luck had fallen on sympathetic ears.

The wand spat out a glowing red sphere no bigger than a pea that streaked down the trail into the midst of the Zhentilar patrol. Then the pea burst into a fireball so powerful the force of the blast knocked Joel off his feet.

Complete silence fell over the woods as every living creature, seen and unseen, took a moment to wonder at the blast. Then the silence broke as the charred corpses of the Zhentilar patrol and their horses thudded to the ground. Birds in the trees overhead began twittering loudly, as if mistaking the fireball for a second sunrise.

Joel picked himself off the ground. He took a few steps toward his vanquished foes, but the sight of the carnage and the stench of burning flesh was too terrible to bear. He turned about and loped down the trail after Holly.

Two The Pilgrims

Still mounted on Butternut, the girl came riding back toward him with the first Zhentilar's horse in tow. "I heard an explosion," she said, "What happened?"

"They're dead," Joel whispered.

"All of them?" Holly asked. "All the ones who were chasing us," Joel replied. He patted the side of the Zhentilar horse for a few moments, making sure the beast was steady, then swung himself into the beast's saddle. "Are you all right?" Holly asked. "You're not injured?" Joel shook his head from side to side, then studied the girl for a moment. Her arms and tunic were splattered with the blood of the last Zhentilar she'd killed and from the wounds she'd received from the first Zhent patrol, but she didn't seem the least bit unnerved.

"I suppose this is all business as usual for you Daggerdale folk," the bard commented dryly.

"If by business as usual, you mean, do we defy invaders to our lands whenever we can, then the answer is yes," Holly replied coolly. "To do anything less would be inviting the fate of Teshendale, conquered by the Black

Network and now only an empty chair at the Dales Council. As it is, the Zhent soldiers harass our citizens, their

orc mercenaries raid our herds, and their puppet rulers force our lord into exile. If you plan to travel through Daggerdale, you had best get used to our "business as usual." " Having said her piece, the girl clucked her tongue at Butternut and rode off down the trail.

Joel sat still for a moment, stunned by the girl's tirade, but after some reflection, he convinced himself he hadn't really said anything that could give offense. There was more than the reputed Daggerdale unfriendliness behind Holly's outburst. Her words had a defensive and rehearsed sound, as if Holly had said it before or had wanted to say it to someone else for a long time.

Joel dug his heels into the ribs of the Zhentilar horse and soon caught up with his guide.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," the bard said as his horse drew up alongside Holly's, "but I sense I've just caught an arrow meant for someone else."

The girl lowered her eyes, and Joel knew he'd hit the mark, but he also knew that wouldn't necessarily gain him any points with her. It would be up to him to bring some civility back to the conversation.

"I didn't mean to imply you or your people had no right to defend yourselves," he insisted.

Holly looked up at him. "I know that. You're right about my speech being meant for someone else. Someone I met said something that really made me angry, but I couldn't think what to reply until the next day. I've been thinking about what I said to you for days now, repeating it over and over, wishing I could go back in the past and answer the person who made me angry. Pretty foolish, huh?"

Joel laughed. "Not really," he replied. "We've all done that before. So who was this scoundrel who slandered the honor of the Daggerdale folk?"

"Some stupid Cormyte serving as an envoy to Shadowdale. He said we were a ruthless, mean-spirited people. Elminster and Lord Mourngrym didn't pay any

attention to him, but he made me terribly angry. I wasn't sure how much respect he warranted, so I didn't reply. Then I felt stupid because I'd lost the chance to show Shadowdale how loyal Daggerfolk are to their dale."

"Elminster and Lord Mourngrym probably admired you all the more for your self-discipline," Joel assured her.

"Do you really think so?" Holly asked with surprise.

"Well, having never met the gentlemen, I can only guess based on what I've heard about them. Sharp words are never wielded so skillfully as silence. So what business did one so young have with such powerful men?" the bard asked curiously.

Holly grinned at him but said nothing.

Joel laughed. "Well, now that you've demonstrated your mastery of silence, perhaps you will deign to move on to the art of small talk. I'll try another question. Where'd you get that curved blade of yours?"

"It was my father's blade," Holly explained. "He was from Zhakara. That's far to the south."

Joel nodded.

"When he was a young man, he put on a cursed ring and was teleported to the north, where the Zhents captured him. He was a slave of the Zhents for years. So was my mom's brother, Burl. My dad helped Uncle Burl escape, so Uncle Burl brought dad to Daggerdale and introduced him to my mother." Holly looked away into the woods and added, "They all died in an orc raid last year—my mom, my dad, my Uncle Burl, my grandma Harrowslough."

"I'm very sorry," Joel said.

"Me, too," Holly whispered.

They rode in silence for nearly a mile. Joel thought of his own mother and father. It would probably be years before he saw them again. He hoped his reunion with them would be more pleasant than his departure had been. His parents couldn't understand his decision to leave the barding college in Berdusk to join Finder priesthood and go on a

pilgrimage. Joel began humming a tune his mother and father often sang together.

The trail left the woods finally and headed out into rolling meadowlands covered with high grasses and wildflowers.

"Something's coming," Holly hissed in an urgent whisper. She slid down from Butternut's back.

The bard dismounted beside her. "What is it?" he asked. "More Zhentilar?"

"I'm not sure," the girl replied. Her brow was furrowed, and she looked more anxious than she had when she was surrounded by the Zhentilar. Holly pointed to a line of trees to the west. "We need to take cover," she insisted.

Joel followed the girl into the tall meadow grass, tugging the confused horses behind him. Young saplings lined the edge of a shallow gully; Holly slid down the gully and Joel followed. Butternut balked until Holly splashed a stone in the small stream at the bottom of the wash. Eager for water, the mare picked its way to the bottom and began to drink thirstily. The Zhentarim mount soon followed. Joel could just pick out the trail they'd left behind, but for the most part, the grass had closed back up after they passed through.

Joel trusted the girl's instincts, but he was unable to squelch his curiosity. Leaving the horses and Holly behind, the bard crawled back the way they'd come until he could peer through the tall grass at the trail beyond.

Whatever was coming had frightened more than just Holly. The woods that he and Holly had just exited erupted with an alarmed chatter. A moment later flocks of birds soared out of the trees and flew overhead. Five deer bounded down the trail and into the grass, the lead buck settling only a few feet from the ravine where Holly and the horses were hidden.

A minute later a great procession of people emerged from the woods. There had to be a hundred at least, peasants mostly, their heads bowed down, mumbling incoherently, their feet shuffling in the dirt, kicking up clouds of dust. Four

young men and two young women in poorly tailored acolytes robes of red and black carried banners of crimson, emblazoned with a black hand. They chanted, louder and more clearly than the peasants, so that Joel could make out their words.

"Lord Bane conies. Fear him always. To defy him is to die. Lord Bane comes. Fear him always. To defy him is to die."

Joel buried his head in his arms and worked hard to stifle his laughter. It was a group of Banites, still worshiping their dead god. Their capacity for self-deceit was unbelievable. The black lord of hatred and tyrann had perished nearly a decade ago, yet he still had worshipers who refused to accept the fact. With their god's death, even Bane's priests were magically impotent, yd here they were, parading about and declaring their god's power.

It was then that Joel noticed the ground was rumbling. He peered down the road, guessing the rumbling might be caused by elephants, or perhaps a captured dragon.

It was no living thing that shook the earth, however, but something far more diabolical. Floating along the trail, its keel hovering inches from the ground, was the strangest-looking ship Joel had ever seen. The hull was fashioned of gigantic tree trunks, bound together with iron bands. Engraved in the iron bands was a script Joel was sure did not originate in the Realms. The hull was nearly a hundred feet long, with a fifteen-foot beam. Charred bits of wood on the lower deck led Joel to guess the upper decks had been destroyed by fire. Three of the bound tree trunks thrust outward from the lower deck, entwined together to form a three-pronged ram. ship's broken rudder plowed through the earth, creating a great furrow in the trail and making the ground shake.

Bound to the ship's bow, looking as if it were standing on the ram, was a giant ebon figurehead of a creature Joel had never seen before. It looked like a great pig or a small elephant with a mushed-in snout, only it stood upright like a

human. Its arms were bound to either side of the bow. The statue wore no clothing, and its black skin had a sheen as if it were highly polished.

Behind the figurehead, on the lower deck, stood a small, slender woman in black plate armor, with a black cape. She held a silver goad, its spiked point honed to a needlelike sharpness. Her long, silky black hair was fastened in a single plait that reached her waist. It was her face, though, that captured Joel's attention. On her cheeks and her chin were diamond-shaped tattoos the color of fresh blood, and set into her forehead was a huge ruby, worth a king's ransom—the telltale markings of one of Bane's chosen priests. Her features might have been attractive, but now they were frozen into a stern, bored expression. She looked no older than Joel, but the bard knew such priests often used their powers to appear youthful.

For a moment the priestess seemed to look right at the spot where Joel hid in the grass. Her lips curled into the slightest hint of a smile. Joel could have sworn he'd been detected, that in the next minute she'd order her minions to flush him out like a bird. Then the bow of the boat reached the trail just in front of where he lay in hiding, and the bard lost sight of the priestess. The boat rumbled past and continued on. A few more peasants straggled behind the floating ship, but they did not stop.

Joel rolled on his back and breathed a sigh of relief. She hadn't seen him. If she hadn't seen him, though, why had she smiled? the bard asked himself. Perhaps she had seen him, but in her pride, she had ignored him, smiling at the way he cowered. Joel felt annoyance churn in his gut. As priestess to a dead god, she was unable to cast even a simple healing spell, yet there she stood, proud of her power and position, and here he lay, priest to a living god, lying low like a snake in the grass.

Healing. He'd forgotten about that. He was so self-conscious about revealing his priesthood he hadn't even

offered to heal the wounds on Holly's arms. She was a tough little thing, but the gashes from the Zhentarim swords must hurt badly.

Joel crawled back through the grass to the wash where Holly and the horses were hidden. He was rehearsing what he would say—"I'm not just a bard. I'm a priest, too. Of Finder. I don't expect you've heard of him"—when he spied Holly by the wash. The bard froze in place and stared.

Holly sat cross-legged in the grass, her arms raised over her head, softly singing a chant to Lathander Morninglord, god of the dawn. Her singing was off-key, but apparently that was no impediment to her prayer being answered. An aura as rosy as the dawn sky gathered about her head and upraised arms. She lowered her arms and wrapped them about herself. The aura contracted about her as if it were sinking into her flesh, then vanished. The cuts on her arms were now nothing more than pale lines scarring her dark brown skin.

So much for my usefulness as a priest, Joel thought. Now, though, he understood this girl who wielded a sword with the skill of a veteran mercenary, who sensed Banites approaching, who could heal her wounds with a prayer.

"You're a paladin, aren't you?" he asked Holly, though he was quite sure of it already.

Holly looked up at him and nodded. "Order of the Aster," she explained, "protectors of Lathander's church."

It felt odd meeting someone with such great responsibilities and so skilled who was even younger than he. For a moment Joel had the unpleasant sensation that he was growing old at twenty.

"Um, I hadn't mentioned it, but I'm a priest of Finder."

"I know," Holly replied.

"My real name's Joel. Joel of Finder," the bard admitted, then realized what Holly had just said. "How did you know?" he asked with surprise.

"That you were a priest? I watched you cast a blessing on us before we fought the second patrol of Zhents."

"Oh. Right. I only mentioned it because I wasn't sure if there was any problem with you helping a priest of a different god."

Holly shook her head. "Not with Finder's folk."

"Finder's folk?" Joel asked. "You know some of his followers in Daggerdale?"

"Not in Daggerdale, no. But some of the creatures in Tarkhaldale are supposed to follow him. There's a priestess and a temple there."

"Tarkhaldale?" Joel asked. He'd never heard of the place. Jedidiah had certainly never mentioned it.

Tarkhaldale. It's up in the mountains on the edge of the Great Desert."

"You mean the Lost Vale?" Joel asked.

"Well, I guess that's what outsiders call it. We've always called it Tarkhaldale. You can hardly go on calling it the Lost Vale now that it's been found and people live there and all," the girl pointed out.

"I suppose not. That's where I'm headed, actually, to the Lost—uh, Tarkhaldale."

"How are you going to get there? There's no path into the mountains. They say Alias the sellsword only gets in and out with the magic of a wizard that lives there."

"I have a map a friend gave me. How do you know so much about the people of Tarkhaldale?"

"Elminster talks about them," Holly explained. "Elminster talks about everything, actually. He's so interesting. I could sit and listen to him for hours."

"I've heard he has quite a reputation with the ladies," Joel noted.

Holly snorted. "Honestly! You sound just like Brother Robin. That's the priest who teaches me. Elminster is old enough to be my grandfather."

"Elminster is old enough to be the grandfather of quite a few women—probably is, for that matter," Joel replied. "Well, he's always treated me like a lady," Holly said, defending the wizard's honor.

"That's his secret, is it?" Joel teased.

Holly bent her head, and even through her dark skin, Joel could see the blush rising to the surface. Not wanting her to feel awkward, he hastily changed the subject.

"You were right about getting off the trail and hiding. Did you know there was a herd of Banites coming or did you just sense evil?" the bard asked.

"I sensed a great evil. I thought it might be Cyriciste or the Xvimists, or some evil beast, but I never expected Banites! I thought they were all worshipping Cyric or Xvim. Don't they know their god is dead?"

"Well, it had occurred to me to run after them and let them know—kind of clue them in, as it were, just in case they hadn't heard, but, well, you know how some people get. What they believe is just as strong as, if not stronger than, the truth."

Holly chuckled. "You're wise beyond your years," she teased.

"I guess it takes one to know one."

Holly grinned, and Joel suddenly felt at ease. At the barding college, he hadn't had many friends. His fellow students had thought him strange, and while his teachers had seemed to like him, they'd all been much older. None of them, students or teachers, had been interested or even tolerant of his joining Finder's priesthood. The college discouraged followers of the new god, fearful they would draw the faithful away from the more traditional barding gods like Oghma or Milil. It was comfortable talking with someone close to his own age who didn't seem to find his priesthood odd or subversive.

"You think it's safe to move on, O native guide?" he asked.

Holly faced northward and seemed to be concentrating in the direction the Banites had taken. After a moment she looked back up at Joel. "Yes. So long as we're not in a hurry to catch up with those Banites."

Once they'd led their horses back to the trail and remounted, they made their way northward at a leisurely pace up and down the meadow-covered hills. Joel pumped Holly for reports about Daggerdale and was soon flooded with information. The girl obviously loved her native land, despite all its trials and dangers.

"We were once called Merrydale," she explained. "That was long before the Zhents came and began using us as a doormat. Back then my people didn't need a dagger to greet strangers."

She knew the history of Daggerdale's founding, its great lords and wizards of the past, all the wealth that could be grown or discovered in its hills and dells, and the names of many of the members of the Black Network who had perpetrated crimes against the Daggerfolk.

Despite how readily and easily the girl talked, there were times when she did not finish one sentence before going on to another. Joel was left with a sense that there was something she wasn't telling him about the dale. He suspected it had something to do with her visit to the lord and mage of Shadowdale, but he wasn't about to press her for details. He was just glad of having found a guide, particularly since Branson had warned him the Daggerfolk were not keen on putting up strangers for the night. With Holly, he suspected he'd be accepted, if not welcomed, at some farm.

Noting how close the sun was to the peaks of the Desertsouth Mountains, Joel decided it was a good time to ask about lodging for the evening. "There's nothing on my map about any inns between here and Dagger Falls. Can we get a farmer to put us up?"

"We should reach Anathar's Dell just about supper-time."

"Is that an inn?" Joel asked.

"It's a safe place," Holly answered simply.

They crested a hill and were treated to a view of the trail for miles ahead as it descended into a wide valley and climbed back up the next hill. Off in the distance, they could see the procession of Banites climbing the hill.

Holly squinted her eyes, trying to focus on the distant group. "What's pulling that big cart?" she asked.

"It's not a cart," Joel explained. "It's some sort of big ship hovering over the ground by means of some magic."

"A magic ship?" Holly puzzled. "What are they doing with a magic ship?"

Joel shrugged. "You tell me. When I was in school, I didn't think I'd need to study much about Bane's followers, Bane being dead and all."

"Let's wait here till they're out of sight," Holly said.

"Fine by me," Joel agreed.

They dismounted and let the horses graze on the grass growing by the trail while they waited for the procession to reach the summit in the distance. All the while Holly watched them with a suspicious glare.

Joel looked down into the valley. Off to the west of the road, he spotted several buildings with wisps of smoke rising from them that might indicate someone cooking supper. "I don't suppose that could be Anathar's Dell," he said hopefully, nodding in the direction of the buildings.

Holly nodded.

"I take it you don't want the Banites to spot us leaving the road and entering the dell," Joel guessed.

"That's right," Holly replied. "The trail leading there is hidden. If you know where to look, it's not hard to find, so we try not to draw attention to it."

When the last pilgrim Banite had crested the far hill and disappeared, Holly began walking Butternut down the trail. Joel followed with the Zhentarim mount. Holly kept her gaze

fixed on the far hill, not taking any chances in case the followers of Bane had kept a watch behind them.

At the bottom of the hill, alongside the road, was a field of poppies and daisies. In the center of the field stood a small stone shrine. A sheaf of wheat was engraved on the stone over the shrine's entrance—an ancient symbol of the goddess Chauntea, the earth-mother. Like many shrines to Chauntea, this one housed a natural spring, and a stream flowed from the shrine across the field to the trail and then through a stone culvert beneath the trail. At the moment there was nothing more than a trickle of water in the streambed.

"Something's wrong," Holly murmured.

"What?" Joel asked.

"It's the shrine spring," she explained. She tied Butternut's lead rope to a sapling, and Joel did likewise with his mount. He followed Holly up the streambed toward the shrine, wishing she weren't in the lead. He didn't have to know a lot about Banites to know they held a lot of animosity for Chauntea and weren't above desecrating her shrines.

Something large and black lay across the doorway to the shrine, and water was pooling up behind it. There was something vaguely familiar about the shape, which made Joel uncomfortable.

Holly drew her sword and approached the shape cautiously, but some inner sense told Joel whatever the thing was, it was dead, and the bard strode up ahead of the paladin. He set his hands on the corpse's shoulder and rolled it toward them. Water gushed out from the shrine, pouring over the dead thing and Joel's boots. The creature was naked and quite evidently male.

"This is the thing I saw on the Banites' ship," Joel explained. "They had it bound to the bow, and since it wasn't moving, I thought it was a figurehead, a statue. I guess it was just dead. I hope it was just dead."

Holly reached down and touched the creature's neck. "He's been dead a long time," she said. "Unless—" Her voice trailed off.

"Unless what?" Joel demanded.

"Priests of Bane cast all sorts of chilling spells to torture their sacrifices. They say that during their evil ceremonies, Bane himself used to reach out and kill the victims with his chilling touch. Then again, this might not even be a warm-blooded creature. Is he a saurian, do you think?" Holly asked the bard.

Joel shook his head. "I doubt it. They're supposed to resemble large lizards. This looks like—well, certainly not like a lizard. I've never seen or heard of anything like this in all my readings and travels."

"Well, we can't leave him blocking the spring. Help me move him aside," Holly insisted.

The creature was over nine feet long, and it took a great deal of energy to roll him away from the shrine's entrance. Fortunately Holly seemed satisfied to stop moving the corpse once the spring-fed stream was no longer blocked.

As Joel pulled his hands away, he realized they were covered with blood. At first he thought the creature was oozing blood from his pores, but closer inspection revealed that every inch of his thick, black hide had been punctured by something long and needlelike. The blood had been what had made his skin seem to shine when Joel had seen him tied to the Banites' ship. Joel recalled the pointed goad he'd seen in the hand of the priestess of Bane, and he felt his stomach churn in disgust.

"I wonder if they saved his corpse just to desecrate the shrine, or if the shrine was just a convenient drop site," Joel growled angrily.

"Probably the latter," Holly answered softly. "The followers of Bane like death, but like the rest of us, they don't care for its stench." From her knapsack, the paladin pulled out a shawl and used it to cover the creature's loins. "Men from

the dell will come to bury him," she said "I'm going to say a prayer for him before we leave him."

Joel drew back along the streambed. Oddly enough, Jedidiah hadn't taught him any prayers to Finder for the dead. Somehow, though, he suspected this poor creature's gods were not known in the Realms.

Three

The Safe Haven

Beyond the shrine a wall of closely planted, long-needed pines lined the western side of the trail. Following Holly's example, Joel led his mount on foot directly toward the trees. Taking care of their horses' eyes, they pushed their way through the lower branches. The horses' hooves left hardly a trace in the thick blanket of pine needles. On the far side of the tree wall was a forest of pine trees, each about the same girth and height, planted in even rows. The effect was both eerie and lovely. Holly remounted and guided her horse between two rows. Joel did the same.

It was much darker beneath the pine than it had been on the Tethyamar Trail. The birds had quieted down considerably.

Joel started suddenly. To his left, he spied a flash of an orange light like a torch or a campfire in the woods. With reflexes that had been finely tuned in the past few hours, the bard gripped the hilt of his sword and whispered Holly's name. In the silent woods, it sounded like a shout. Without halting, the girl twisted about, leaning one hand leisurely on Butternut's rump. "What's wrong?" she asked. Joel nodded in the direction of the light. "I thought I saw a torch." To his dismay, he spied a second light on his right, then a third in front of Holly's horses. "We have company," he said.

Holly laughed, and the sound echoing through the pines startled the bard. It was a relaxed laughter, and all fears of

Zhentilar and Banites retreated before it, but still it puzzled the bard.

"What are they? Are they people from the dell? How did they know we'd be coming?" he demanded.

"No," Holly said with a chuckle. "They're just piggy little firestars, hoping you'll light a campfire or cast a light spell."

One of the lights broke free of the woods and drifted within a few feet of Joel's face. It was a free-floating ball, about the size of his fist, glowing a radiant orange. Peering more closely, the bard could make out bands and sparkles of blue dancing across its surface.

Realizing he still held on to the hilt of his sword, Joel asked, "Are they dangerous?"

"Only if you attack them," Holly explained. "They have a shocking sting. Otherwise they're harmless. They're wild creatures that eat any light they can get near—firelight or magic light. They quench it somehow. They're more of a nuisance than anything else, except when they bother the Zhentilar. Then they're loyal allies of the people of Daggerdale."

Holly's tone was so serious Joel had to laugh. "Perform a lot of forays against the Zhents, do they?" the bard asked.

"They sting the Zhents a lot. The Zhents can't seem to get the hang of ignoring them," Holly explained. "The Zhents would attack a chipmunk if they caught it staring at them too long."

Feeling rather foolish, Joel released the hilt of his sword. A second firestar, this one lemon-shaded, drew close. The pair floated alongside him until a third, somewhat larger, reddish sphere, with glittering spangles of white, joined them. All three lights bobbed and zipped about one another, until the larger one left. A few minutes later the first two floated back into the woods.

Every few minutes new firestars swooped about the horses, then drifted off. Joel was reminded of the squirrels in the parks of Suzail, gorged on the bread crumbs of

Cormyrean nobles and merchants, constantly begging from every passerby.

"Are they intelligent?" Joel asked curiously.

Holly shrugged. "Who knows?" she replied.

After half a mile, the pine forest ended as abruptly as it had begun. They now stood at the edge of a meadow. The last rays of the sun poked between two peaks of the Desertsouth Mountains, but the rest of the sky was a blanket of dark blue, speckled with the earliest stars.

They rode side by side now, in the twilight, downward into the dell, through planted fields and well-tended orchards. Every few acres they passed a barn. The barns were so weather-beaten that from a distance they appeared abandoned. As he passed by one such structure, Joel could see that it was really quite sturdy. Farther on, he spotted a girl with a milking pail coming out of another barn.

The bard was just wondering if a hidden path and old buildings were all that kept the dell safe from intruders when something very large rustled in the rye grass off to his right, startling his horse to a bolt. It took several seconds to bring the beast under control. Holly trotted up to his side. "What was that?" Joel asked.

"It was just a guardian," Holly answered. "It knows better than to attack. The silly Zhent horse probably got a whiff of it. Keep moving."

"What sort of guardian?" Joel asked.

The sort that starts out as a cute cub and grows up to eat Zhents for dinner," Holly answered. Then she began telling him the history of the dell. Joel listened with one ear while the other remained alert for some sound of a guardian. The dell was named for the wizard Anathar, who had perished long ago protecting the local dwarves from a marauding dragon. That act apparently sealed the friendship of the humans and dwarves of the dell, and the small community had flourished ever since.

Joel couldn't see any mine entrances or other indications of dwarvish presence. No doubt, he thought, the dwarves of Daggerdale are just as insular and protective as the humans.

Finally they came to the heart of the dell, the center where people lived. It was dominated by a large stone manor, blazing with light from every window. Many small cottages surrounded the manor, a few with lamplight glittering in their windows, but most of them were dark. As they approached the manor, Joel could hear human voices. No doubt the larger building was the hub of the community. Outside its windows, firestars hovered like moths, blocked from entry by wire grates cunningly fashioned in intricate geometric designs Dwarven workmanship at its finest, Joel realized, both useful and lovely.

Holly and Joel tied their mounts to a hitching post and hurried through the door before any firestars could flit past them. They stood in a large common room, occupied by at least fifty people, mostly human, the rest dwarves. Tonight the common room served as a local tavern. Most of the inhabitants sat on benches at rows of great oak tables, drinking from frothy-topped mugs and conversing, but a few more boisterous souls bowled ninepins in the aisles between the tables, while several others cheered on a pair of dart players.

Upon Joel's entry, a silence spread from the doorway outward as every person within, to the last solitary being, stopped what he or she was doing and eyed the bard. Their stares were most unwelcoming, even hostile. Joel stiffened.

Holly strode forward and addressed the room. "This is Joel, a priest of Finder. He rescued me from a Zhent patrol and vanquished our pursuit. I vouch for him."

The hard glares softened slightly. Most of the onlookers gave Joel a dismissive nod and returned to their amusements and conversations. From what Joel had heard about the Dalesmen of Daggerdale, that was a better reception than he'd have gotten had Holly not spoken for

him and as good a welcome as he could expect. Joel couldn't help but note the conversations had become much more subdued in his presence. He might be tolerated, but it would take more than Holly's word for him to be trusted.

Holly made for a table by the hearth in the center of the room. About the table were seven large oaken chairs, richly carved with figures of men and elves battling against drow, dragons, and other fell creatures. The chairs' armrests were polished smooth with years of use, and their backs and sides held more than a few gouges and cuts, as if they had seen battles of their own.

Seated at the head of the table, in the largest chair, was a man dressed in worn leathers. He was an older man with handsome features, long brown hair combed down his back, and a neatly cropped beard. As Holly approached, he rose to greet her, calling out, "Harrowslough. Welcome."

Holly dropped to one knee before the man. Joel stood uncomfortably behind her, not sure what he should do. The older man raised Holly to her feet.

"My lord," Holly said, "allow me to present Joel of Finder. I owe the success of my mission to him. Bard, this is Lord Randal Morn, rightful ruler of the lands you now cross."

Joel's mouth went dry. Although Branson had few kind words for the people of Daggerdale in general, the caravan guard had spoken of Randal Morn with the respect and awe reserved for a legend. Daggerdale's beleaguered lord was a tough guerilla fighter who had been harrying the Zhentilar patrols for years now. The Zhents had a sizable bounty on his head. Wordlessly Joel bowed deeply. Not only had Joel not expected to meet Morn, but Morn was not what Joel anticipated at all. The lord of Daggerdale was several inches shorter than Joel. His physique was more like a farmer's—lean, with muscular forearms. His movements were graceful. His hazel eyes did not pierce one to the bone, but looked dreamy and sad.

"Joel has another title, my lord," Holly said, filling in the void Joel's silence created. "He calls himself the Rebel Bard."

Morn laughed as Holly stood there, grinning at some joke. Joel looked from Holly to Morn, confused.

"Then it is destined that we meet, Rebel Bard," Morn said, his voice as smooth as polished wood, "for I am known in these parts as the Rebel Lord."

Joel flushed at the coincidence. Finally he found his voice. "I thank you for the opportunity to visit your fair land, your lordship," he said. "It has a beauty unknown to many."

"He's a polite one, Harrowslough," Morn noted with a chuckle. "Would that the Zhentilar were so well-mannered."

"That could hardly be, sir," Joel replied, "seeing how they come without invitation and leave such rude calling cards."

Morn snorted with amusement, and Joel allowed himself to relax a little.

"You must excuse us, Rebel Bard, but I need to speak privately with young Harrowslough. Take my place here," Morn insisted, tapping on the chair from which he'd risen, "and we'll see that you get fed." He looked about the room and shouted, "Kharva!"

A dwarven woman carrying a large tureen wove her way through the room's inhabitants. A younger dwarf carrying bowls and spoons trailed behind her. Randal Morn spoke some words in dwarvish, then led the young paladin away. They disappeared into the crowd, doubtlessly to another room far from prying ears.

Kharva had set down the soup tureen and stood staring up at Joel expectantly. The Rebel Bard lowered himself nervously into Randal Morn's seat, wondering if he were usurping the traditional throne of the rebel leader. Kharva's assistant clattered a wooden bowl and spoon in front of him, and the dwarven woman, standing on a chair, removed the top of the tureen.

The odor of beef stew wafted across Joel's face, and his stomach growled. He realized his last meal had been over

eight hours ago, and that had been nothing but dried fruit and hardtack. The beef stew before him was bountiful, with huge lumps of beef that peeled apart in delicious strings, potatoes and carrots that were neither undercooked nor too soft, tiny onions that glittered like pearls, and a rich broth flavored with wine. Another secret of the Daggerfolk, Joel noted, was that they could cook.

From an apron pocket, Kharva pulled out a round loaf of warm, crusty bread and pressed it into Joel's hands. Waving her hand at the tureen, she said, "Take all you want, but—" the woman hesitated ominously— "leave room for dessert," she finished with a wink. A second young dwarf laid a brimming mug of ale by the tureen. Then all three melted into the crowd of the room.

Joel tore off a hunk of bread and, sampling it, sighed. It was honeyed and fresh enough to have been baked that morning. He slurped at the ale, then set to work devouring his first helping of the stew, mopping up every last drop of the broth with the bread. It wasn't until he'd worked halfway through his second helping that the bard realized he was being watched.

While most of the dalesfolk had seen fit to ignore him, one, a giant of a man seated in a chair to Joel's right, fixed his gaze on the bard's every move. At first Joel just glanced up at the man between mouthfuls of stew and bread. The watcher had the sort of appearance Joel had expected from the legendary Rebel Lord. The man's crossed arms were like tree trunks. His chest, clad in scaled armor, could have served a small room as a wall. The long black braid hanging down his back bristled with silvered spikes. His thick beard framed a permanent scowl. One eye was covered with a steel eye patch, while the other eye, sheathed below a sullen brow, glared daggers at the bard.

Unable to stand the examination without answering it somehow, Joel ventured, "This is really good food."

The huge man did not respond.

"You have a very good cook here," the bard added.

The huge man remained impassive and as silent as stone.

Joel took a swallow of ale, then tried again. "Lord Randal has been a most gracious host."

Unexpectedly, the scowl deepened on the huge man's face, and Joel began to feel oppressed by the silence.

"Yes, sir," the bard said as he served himself thirds, "this is really good food."

Although the lack of conversation left Joel with nothing to do but eat, he restrained himself from taking a fourth serving. Shortly thereafter, Kharva came by to reward him with another flagon of ale and the promised dessert—fresh strawberries in cream. "First of the season," the dwarf informed him with a smile, letting him know how privileged he should feel.

After polishing off the berries, Joel slumped back in Randal Morn's chair with his flagon of ale and turned his attention to the bowlers, pointedly ignoring the big man on his right. Finally Joel caught sight of Holly and Morn. Morn had stopped to speak with one of the ninepins bowlers, but he kept Holly by his side, including her in their conversation.

Holly had changed from her blood-spattered wool outfit to an ornate yellow and crimson robe of silk, embroidered with blue and green peacock feathers, very much the style of a follower of Lathander. In Morn's company, she seemed older somehow. Perhaps it was the intense look of concentration she wore as she listened to the Rebel Lord speak, or the respectful way Morn listened in turn when she spoke. Whatever it was, Joel realized he'd been very lucky in his choice of damsels in distress. The bard rose as Holly and Morn approached his table, but Morn waved for him to be seated, taking the seat to Joel's left, across from the huge man who had kept a silent, scowling watch on his guest.

"Has Bear here been keeping you company?" Morn asked, indicating the huge man with a nod of his head.

"Rarely have I found so riveting a conversationalist," Joel replied, straight-faced.

Randal blinked for a moment, then grinned. "Aye. Once you get him started, there's no stopping him."

"And knowledgeable!" Joel placed a hand flat against the table, "Why, I never knew there were so many naughty limericks involving Elminster."

Randal Morn chuckled, but Bear remained as impassive as if he'd been carved in stone.

"Bear's a good man," the lord stated. "His job is to trust no one, so that I might still trust a few. His distrust has saved my life more than once in these hazardous times," Morn explained, nodding his gratitude to the huge man. Then he turned his attention back to Joel. "Harrowslough tells me you're a bard, schooled in the western colleges."

"Berdusk," replied Joel, "but I've broken with their traditional methods."

"I fancy myself fairly accomplished in music," Morn said, reaching for a lute by the fire. "Would you do me the honor of accompanying me?"

Joel was accustomed to singing for his supper, though it was unusual to be asked to accompany his host. Warmed by the stew in his belly, the ale coursing through his veins, and Morn's gracious manner, Joel was prepared to go to any lengths to entertain the Rebel Lord. He unhooked his birdpipes from his belt. He'd cut the reeds and fashioned this set of pipes himself in his student days. One teacher had criticized the instrument for its lack of standard tones, but it was Joel's favorite. It made lovely music.

"Do you know 'Jonstan the Rover'?" Morn asked, strumming the first chord. The lute's tuning was slightly flat, but Joel played a matching chord on the bird-pipes, then blew the notes to the first five bars. Heads turned in his direction. The bowlers and dart players paused expectantly.

With a signal from Morn, the pair played the song from the beginning. Fortunately Morn's voice was better than his

tuning. It flowed smoothly and melodiously over the words to the old dales tune. Joel played a third lower than the singer, matching his meter and pacing. Morn paused between the third and fourth verse, allowing Joel the opportunity to improvise a smooth bridge.

At the end of the first song, Joel segued into "The River of Life," an old nursery rhyme the mortal Finder had set to music. Morn needed only a measure to pick up the chords, then the verse, which gave Joel great pleasure. Ever since the Harpers had lifted their ban on Finder's music, Joel's god's songs had flourished in the Realms. Next the Rebel Lord began the melody of "The Ballad of the Dream Weaver," and Joel joined in without missing a beat, but the lyrics Morn sang were different from the ones Joel had learned. The bard noted them with interest.

As the melodies shifted between the two men, the others around them grew quiet and all conversation died away. A few sang along, but quietly, in half mumbles. There were no outstanding voices beyond Morn's, which was not too unusual, but it was odd that no one else sang out with gusto. No wonder Randal was anxious to play with another minstrel.

At the close of "Dalesman's Holiday ," Joel launched into "The Toasting Song." The tune was an old staple, and Morn strummed along as Joel set aside his pipes to sing.

The Toasting Song" was what bards called a button song. Its chorus was easy to learn and repeat, and the meter of its verses so simple anyone could "button" any number of names and situations into the song. In general, it was used to thank—or tweak—one's host, or to report on everything from the weather to the latest court gossip. Joel rose from his chair and sang the standard chorus:

"And now we give a Toast, a Toast To guests and friends and hosts, and hosts For lies and tales and boasts, and boasts Of who can drink the most, the most!"

Then Joel fired off the first impromptu verse:

"We toast the folk of Daggerdale, Whose hearts and minds will never fail, Whose land holds wondrous firestars And truly great and noble bars!"

There was laughter and a few cheers from the crowd, and some members of the audience joined in on the chorus. A few even smiled when Joel met their gaze. The bard cornered Kharva as she tried surreptitiously to clear away the tureen from Joel's table. The dwarven woman frowned sternly as the young man sang a verse in her honor.

"We toast good Kharva's cooking skills, Which cure all human and dwarven ills, For with each sip and with each bite, We're soon too stuffed to start a fight!"

Kharva guffawed heartily, and laughter burst from the crowd. More joined in on the chorus. One table punctuated the last two words of each line by pounding on the table, creating an accompanying percussion section. Joel walked about the table until he stood behind his next victim.

"We toast Lathander's paladins, Whose lives are without stains or sins, Who'll leap into every fray or mess, Provided they have the proper dress!"

Holly squealed and covered her face with her hands. Joel could see the flush beneath her dark skin. Now nearly the whole house sang the chorus, each group trying to outshout or outpound the others. Next Joel circled behind the stoic form of Bear, still grim-faced and silent, his arms folded.

"Let's toast the absent Zhentarim, Who loose upon us evil grim. To know these fools and avoid their sting, Just watch for those who will not si—"

Bear's fist came out of nowhere. One moment Joel had a clear view of grinning dalesfolk, and in the next a small meteorite of flesh closed directly with his nose. There was a flash of light, then darkness. When Joel's eyes opened again, he was lying on the floor. Holly was hovering over him, obstructing his view, but he could hear Randal Morn castigating the huge bodyguard.

"What did you do that for?" the Rebel Lord snarled.

"He insulted me," Bear grunted. "Us. Daggerdale. He was mocking us."

"The only insult was the interruption of our song," Morn snapped. "If you'd paused to look around, you might have noted that everyone else was laughing and singing."

Bear blushed deeply and reiterated, "I thought he was insulting us."

"Save your offended zeal for fighting the Zhentarim," Morn retorted. Turning to Holly, he asked, "How is he?"

Holly had placed her hands on Joel's face lightly, but the pressure was nearly unbearable. Then the bard recognized the rosy-hued aura of the paladin's healing touch. The sharp pain in the back of his head subsided to a dull throbbing and an unpleasant itching all about his nose.

"Feeling better, Joel?" the girl asked.

Talk about your rough audiences," Joel muttered.

Morn grunted agreement and reached out with his hand. Joel missed the hand the first try, but grabbed it the second. The Rebel Lord pulled the Rebel Bard to his feet.

Joel cocked his head at Bear. "If he hits the Zhents that hard, you'll soon have no worries," the bard joked. Then the room swayed about him, and he had to steady himself against the table.

Take him to one of the cottages to rest," Morn instructed Holly. "When he's recovered and wants to continue his journey, Bear will serve as his escort, by way of an apology."

Neither Holly nor Bear looked pleased with that arrangement. Bear opened his mouth, no doubt to argue, but shut it again a moment later. The huge man nodded to his lord, then turned on his heel and disappeared into the crowd. A few members of the audience raised a mug to Joel, but most of them had returned to their earlier diversions. Another typical evening in Daggerdale, the young bard suspected.

Morn handed Joel his pipes. "Sorry about that," he said sheepishly. "Bear often sees threats where none exist. He's a

good man, though."

"So you've said," Joel replied, taking the pipes with one hand while holding his tender nose with the other. "Really, though, you needn't spare him for my sake. Holly's been a wonderful guide."

"Yes, but I'm afraid I have need of her skills in the days to come. Yet I would prefer knowing you were escorted safely through my land."

"Bear it is, then," Joel agreed, though only so as not: appear disagreeable to Morn.

"I'll have someone see to your horse while Holly shows you to your quarters," Morn said.

Holly led Joel to the door. Outside, the air had turned cool. The moon had not yet risen, and the sky was a jumble of stars. Not far off, hidden in the dark, a large cat snarled. Joel remembered the guardian that had scared his horse.

A young dwarf handed Holly a lantern, and the paladin led the bard away from the manor down a meadow path. Firestars zipped about them. Holly halted at the door to a small cottage and set the lantern down on the front stoop.

"I'm sorry I can't escort you farther," the girl said.

"I understand. You have a duty to Morn. I'll be fine with Bear."

"About Bear ..." Holly paused, as if searching for the right words. "Just watch yourself with him."

"I'll stay out of arm's reach," Joel assured her with a grin.

"I don't trust him," the paladin whispered.

"Why not?" Joel asked, thinking immediately of the legendary paladin's ability to plum the depths of the soul.

"It's not what you think," Holly replied. "I don't sense evil about him. And it's not that he's ever done anything really wrong. He's just so utterly devoted, so grim, so humorless. He makes my stomach knot. It's not exactly something I can tell to Lord Randal."

Joel nodded with understanding. Morn wasn't likely to have his judgment swayed by a girl's gut instinct, even if

she was a useful and loyal subject. "I'll keep my eyes open," he assured her.

"Just take care of yourself," she ordered. "And thanks for everything back there, with the Zhents."

"My pleasure," the bard insisted. He thrust out his hand, and Holly grasped his wrist as he held hers.

"Good-bye and good luck," the girl said. A moment later she disappeared into the darkness.

"Good luck to you, Holly Harrowslough," Joel sang softly after her. Then he picked up the lantern and retired into the cottage.

Once inside, Joel tugged off his boots and flopped down on the bed. Placing his fingertips across his brow, he sang a short discordant scale and concentrated his energies as Jedidiah had taught him. His hands glowed a soft blue, and a moment later the throbbing in his head and the tingling in his nose dissipated.

He still felt a little fuzzy, but that, he suspected, was the ale. Just need to get some sleep, he told himself. A few minutes later he was snoring softly.

The next morning the young dwarf who'd served him ale brought by a tray of bread and milk and a message from Bear that he was waiting at the manor and would be ready to leave whenever the bard gave the word.

Joel sent back word he'd be ready within the hour.

Scrubbed and fed, the bard strolled down to the manor house where Butternut was tied up, groomed, fed, bridled, and saddled. Bear stomped up leading a heavy black draft horse for his own mount. Joel greeted him a good morning, to which Bear grunted. The huge man had no words of greeting, let alone any of apology. At least he did not glare so much as he had the night before, or so Joel imagined.

Kharva poked her head out of the door. "Lord Randal and Harrowslough left at dawn. They said to wish you fair travel. There are fresh provisions in your saddlebags. I packed you some pies made from the leftover stew."

"I can smell them," Joel noted. "The scent will drive me crazy all morning. I thank you." He made a deep bow. Kharva laughed and disappeared back into the manor.

No one else came to see them off. They must all be working, Joel told himself. Still, it felt odd that not even a few children or one old geezer stood by to wave them out of town.

Joel mounted Butternut. "I'm headed for the opposite bank of the River Ashaba, then into the mountains," he explained to Bear.

Bear grunted and mounted his draft horse.

"Anytime you want to stop and point out some local sites of interest, feel free," Joel added.

Bear grunted again and kicked his horse into motion.

Having expended all the topics for morning conversation, Joel followed behind with Butternut.

Bear led Joel out of the dell by a northward path wide enough for a single rider, which suited the Rebel Bard perfectly. He lagged behind the black draft horse by several lengths, alone with his own thoughts.

Mostly those thoughts were preoccupied with Holly and the nature of her faith. She was so much younger than he, yet she seemed to have effortlessly melded her duties as a paladin of Lathander into the rest of her life. Was it something she had prepared for all her life? If I wear the title of priest long enough, will it finally feel like it fits? he wondered.

From the time he had first spoken with Jedidiah, Joel had been excited by the idea of following Finder, but he still couldn't fathom why Jedidiah had been so eager for him to be more than a follower. What in the Realms made Jedidiah think I would make a good priest?

Finally thoughts about the scenery shoved their way into the forefront of Joel's mind. The path Bear chose led them past, by Joel's count, over thirty abandoned farms, each marked by great swaths of meadow that had once been

fields, overgrown orchards, and burnt-out farmhouses. Between the deprivations of the Zhentilar occupation, marauding orcs, and no doubt a dragon or two, the Daggerdale folk hereabouts had apparently given up and left their land to lie fallow. Anathar's Dell's survival was a lone exception to the rule.

Hoping to brighten his mood, Joel was about to suggest to Bear that they stop for an early lunch. He urged Butternut into the field and pulled her up alongside Bear's draft horse. That's when he spotted the Zhentilar. There was a whole patrol resting in the shade of an old orchard at the far side of the meadow he and Bear were now crossing. Most had dismounted and were idly chucking rocks at the tree trunks, but at least three remained in their saddles watching the horizon.

"Hey," Joel whispered, "what's—"

Bear held up a single hand. Despite himself, Joel flinched.

"Just ride on," Bear growled softly. "There won't be any trouble."

Joel nodded, realizing Bear must know what he was doing. The trick was to remain calm and ride on past just as Bear and other native Daggerdalefolk must do dozens of times a day.

This patrol was larger than the two Joel had encountered the day before, but it was much more ragged. The soldiers' leather jerkins were motley, and not all of them sported the Zhentarim badge of black and yellow. There was an even mix of men and women in the group. The men's faces were all unshaven and the women's hair tangled, and none of them appeared to have washed since the last rainstorm. They looked more like brigands than soldiers. Nonetheless they were intimidating. More than half of them looked as if they could give Bear a good wrestling match.

It was the sight of their leader that unnerved Joel the most. He was one of those who remained mounted. Over a full suit of black plate mail, the man wore an open black

robe with green piping. Emerald-colored stones glistened from the backs of his black gauntlets. Any doubt Joel may have had concerning the leader's profession vaporized upon spotting the green stole he wore. Embroidered on either end was the symbol of a black hand with glowing green eyes. The leader was a priest of the god Iyachtu Xvim, Godson of Bane.

Iyachtu Xvim's followers, called Xvimists, were growing in numbers in the north, poaching on the not-so-faithful of Cyric, the Mad God. Xvimists held to many of the same dogmas as the former Banites. Tyranny and hatred were their reasons for living. There was no love lost between Iyachtu and the dead god who'd been his father, yet Iyachtu's people considered Banites the property of Bane's heir, their god. They were said to embrace Banites into their fold, willing or not. Joel wondered if they'd heard reports of the pilgrim Banites Joel had spotted yesterday. Banite and Xvimite doctrine held that followers of all other religions were fools to be despised and abused.

Bear nodded as they approached the orchard. A few of the Zhentilar nodded back. Joel gave a jerky copy of the nod, keeping his expression completely neutral, trying to appear neither weak nor aggressive.

The priest leader nudged his mount forward, partially blocking the path. Bear halted his mount. Joel urged Butternut to move up alongside the draft horse. His mind raced as he tried to think what to say, and what not to say, to these people. Then he realized that this was Bear's country, and this was Bear's problem. Bear would know exactly what to say.

"Darkness falls," the priest of Xvim greeted them, holding up his left hand, palm outward. For a brief moment green flame flickered at the priest's fingertips. "And darkness rises again," Bear responded, holding up his left hand. Green flame danced along his fingertips as well. Joel started with surprise, and Holly's warning about Bear instantly came to

mind. "And your cause?" the priest queried. "I bring an offering," Bear explained. "A priest of Finder."

Offering! Joel thought. Realizing he had foolishly come within arm's reach of Bear, Joel pulled on Butternut's reins. Butternut tried to step backward, but another Zhentilar had positioned himself right behind the mare. Annoyed, the mare kicked backward, then leapt forward, delivering Joel right into Bear's fast.

The blow struck the bard in the side of the head. Then, before he could react, the huge man lifted the bard from the saddle and hurled him to the ground.

Joel had the presence of mind to roll away from Butternut's hooves, but before he could rise to his feet, another Zhentilar booted him in the stomach. The bard doubled over and fell back to the ground. When he'd finally caught his breath and looked back up, Bear was standing over him, smiling, finally amused by the bard.

Behind the huge man, Joel could see the priest of Xvim, still mounted, also smiling. "Alive," the priest said to Bear. "Make him hurt all you want, but keep him alive for later."

Some of Branson's instructions in combat finally worked their way to the bard's thoughts. He rolled away from Bear and up to his feet with his sword drawn. The weapon did not stop Bear's advance.

Determined that the huge man should at the very least learn to respect his steel blade, Joel lunged outward. The tip of his sword hit something hard beneath Bear's leather jerkin and skittered out and downward until it finally sunk into something soft. Joel jumped back a step, yanking his sword with him. There was blood on the end of the blade. Bear remained standing like some magical golem.

A split second later the huge man closed on the surprised bard, wrapping one massive hand about Joel's right wrist and the other about Joel's windpipe. The sword clattered from Joel's nerveless fingers. With his left hand, Joel grabbed for the wand at his belt and pointed it at Bear's belly, hoping

it might turn the huge man into something small, like a beetle, but without air, the bard couldn't choke out the wand's command word. Bear let go of Joel's right hand and yanked away the wand. Once he'd thrown the magical stick to the ground, he tightened his grip about his opponent's throat. Dark spots began appearing before Joel's eyes.

Then suddenly Bear released both his neck and wrist. Joel tumbled to the ground. Groggy, he rose again to his feet, expecting some worse punishment from the traitorous Bear. After a moment he realized Bear's attack would not be forthcoming any time soon.

As the dark spots faded from his eyes, he could see that the Zhentilar were fighting with someone else, Someone mounted on a Zhentilar horse, wielding a sword. Someone wearing a crimson and yellow blouse with blue and green peacock stitching.

Holly followed us, Joel realized. The damsel in distress has come to my rescue. Now we have to escape from the Zhents again. I've got to get my wits about me.

Most of the Zhentilar had begun swarming around Holly. Bear turned half away from Joel to warn them "Look out!" the huge man bellowed. "She's a practiced killer!"

Joel caught sight of the wand lying on the ground at Bear's feet. He looked back up at Bear and caught the glitter of the traitor's steel eye patch. He was on the huge man's blind side.

Keeping bent over low, Joel dashed past Bear, scooping up the wand as he moved. He stopped and spun about with his back to a tree and the wand out before him. He looked back at Holly. At least three Zhentilar lay on the ground around her, but those remaining had managed to trip her horse to the ground, yank her from the saddle, and disarm her. Still she fought, kicking and punching with unerring precision. Unfortunately, Joel realized, he couldn't fire the wand at her attackers and risk injuring her.

He had other targets, however. The priest of Xvim, still mounted on his horse, sat watching the paladin's battle with an amused smile on his face. Joel aimed the wand at him, pleased to see that Bear stood in the line of fire. The bard whispered the command word.

Vast cloud of black smoke issued from the wand and coalesced a moment later into a horrific creature completely unknown to Joel. It was larger than the largest bull Joel had ever seen, with wrinkled gray skin and a single horn in the center of its head. It charged toward Bear and the priest with a bellowing roar.

Bear spun about just in time to sidestep the beast's charge, but the priest of Xvim, his attention focused on Holly, did not react quickly enough to keep his horse from being gutted by the beast's horn.

Joel pointed the wand again at Bear, but he was too late. The huge man had already closed on him. He slammed into the bard, flattened him into the ground, then delivered blow after blow with his elbows to the bard's face.

From far off, Joel could hear Holly screaming. Then silence and blackness enveloped him.

Four The Sacrifice

How long he remained unconscious Joel could not tell, but at some point he began to sense he was rolling from side to side. Somehow he knew he was on a ship bound for some far-off land. Through a gray haze, he saw the prow of the floating ship that had accompanied the pilgrim Banites. Standing on the deck over his prone form was the Banite priestess with her silver goad. She turned to face him, wearing a pitiless smile.

Instinctively the Rebel Bard tried to back away, but his hands and feet were chained. He shouted. A moment later when he opened his eyes, he realized he had been

dreaming. The rolling had stopped, and the ship and the priestess of Bane were gone.

Holly hovered over him, surrounded by a rosy glow, which quickly faded. She'd been using her paladin's gift of healing to repair the damage done by Bear's beating. Her pretty features were darkened with concern. Joel raised an arm to ruffle her hair reassuringly, then realized the chains were not just part of a dream. He and the paladin both were shackled hand and foot, short chains linking the shackles and a slightly longer one attached to the chains at their wrists, linking them one to the other.

Joel squinted and blinked in the sunlight streaming over Holly's shoulder. The sun was westering over the mountains, but the brightness still hurt Joel's eyes. Holly shifted her position to shade his face. "Are you all right?" the girl asked.

"Just tell me the priestess of Bane was a dream," Joel croaked, his throat raw and parched.

"Why would you dream about a priestess of Bane?" Holly asked. "It's a priest of Xvim who's captured us. Don't you remember?"

"Priest of Xvim, a dozen Zhentilar, and one ugly Bear," Joel muttered, remembering now what had happened. With Holly's help, he sat up and looked around. He could see all the parties named seated beneath the shade of a tree. "What were you doing there?" he demanded of Holly.

"I took a detour from my route to check on Bear," Holly explained. "When I saw him throw you from your horse I tried to ride to the rescue."

"You should have ridden right to Lord Randal and let him know."

"I couldn't just let them keep beating you up," Holly argued. "With Bear there, I couldn't bluff them like you did, so I just attacked. It was the only thing I could think of."

Joel sighed. As much as he liked the paladin, subtlety, he realized, was not her forte. Trying to sound hopeful, the bard asked, "So where are we now?"

"You've been out since yesterday. We passed through Dagger Falls some time after noon today. They had you slung across the back of a packhorse. Now that you're awake, you'll have to march."

"What happened to Butternut?" Joel asked.

"She had the sense to bolt," Holly answered.

Joel thought of all the things in Butternut's saddlebags that were lost to him now, especially Kharva's beef stew pies. He felt his stomach growl.

"So Bear can't risk going back to Anathar's Dell," Holly explained. "When your horse shows up there, riderless, there will be a great many questions asked."

"Well, that's a small blessing, at any rate. Where are they taking us now?" Joel asked.

"There," Holly said, motioning with both manacled hands over Joel's right shoulder.

The bard twisted about. They sat on a slope looking down over a vale. On the opposite side of the vale, where Holly had just motioned, was a squat black tower. Hanging in the sky over the tower was a huge chunk of rock shaped like a great hornet's nest.

"That's the Flaming Tower, and the flying rock above it is called The Temple in the Sky," Holly explained. "No one knows much about the rock except that it's supposed to be inhabited by a beast cult. The beast cult has made an alliance with the people in the tower."

"And who's in the tower?" Joel asked.

"It used to be held by Zhents who followed Cyric, God of Lies, but since Cyric's madness has grown, their power's been slipping. In his last report, Lord Randal said the tower's now held by Zhents who follow Iyachtu Xvim."

"Same as our captors," Joel noted. "So why aren't our captors hurrying across the vale to get home in time for supper?"

"Look harder ... at the east side of the tower," Holly replied.

Joel focused on the area Holly had indicated. It started with surprise. There, parked at the tower gate, was the floating ship of the Banite pilgrims. The hulking vessel seemed small and fragile next to the massive tower. Joel squinted, but he couldn't see any sign of the pilgrims or the priestess on or near the ship.

"There was some sort of fight going on when we arrived," Holly explained. "The Banites were trying to get in the tower, and the Xvim people were trying to keep them out. Our captors sent a scout down to find out if it was safe to approach."

"Sounds like the Zhents are spending more time with religious feuds than in conspiring to conquer the Realms," Joel noted.

"It's one small bit of luck," Holly replied. "Before the Time of Troubles, when the Zhents were all united under Bane, their power was nearly unassailable. Since Bane's death, the people of the dales have been given some breathing space." Holly paused, then nodded toward a single rider climbing the hill toward them. "There's the scout our captors sent out," she said.

The rider dismounted before the priest of Xvim. Joel and Holly couldn't hear what he reported, but they heard the laughter of their captors. One of the Zhentilar, a tall woman with a shaved head, mounted her horse and rode over to where Joel and Holly sat. With a practiced smoothness, the soldier leaned over with a pole and snatched up the center of the chain linking the prisoners. Yanking on the chain, the woman barked a sharp command for them to get up and start moving.

Joel fought back his urge to resist. The Xvimists had shown no compunction about injuring their captives, and he wanted to arrive at the tower conscious and alert. Feeling as stiff as a board, he accepted Holly's help getting to his feet, but once standing, he found he could move without pain. Together bard and paladin walked alongside the soldier's

horse as she followed her unit down into the vale. They crossed a stream, and Holly and Joel, unmounted, were expected to endure the chill water seeping into their boots. The party followed the stream for some distance before coming to a trail that led up to the tower.

As they climbed the hill, Joel could pick out people on the roof of the tower throwing rocks down on the Banite ship. It was only when the hulking ship's battering ram broke off and its hull rocked perilously close to tipping over that Joel realized the rocks were boulders, and the people on the roof throwing the missiles were giants.

Whoever controlled the Banite ship apparently chose retreat over obliteration. The vessel turned about in place, then floated westward, still appearing majestic despite its damage.

Their captors laughed at the ship and continued up the trail toward the tower, which squatted on the hilltop like a massive spider. A hundred yards beyond the tower lay the edge of the greatBorderForest , which, according to Holly, the Zhentarim plundered for the lumber and burned down for the land.

The fortress itself Joel estimated to be three hundred feet square and a hundred feet high. Its black granite block walls were broken only by a series of arrow slits. The mortar seaming the granite blocks was the color of dried blood and gleamed in the light of the setting sun like burning coals.

It was the Temple in the Sky, however, that impressed Joel more. A great chain fastened it to the roof of the tower, as if it might float off like a dandelion seed were it not moored, yet its mass was even greater than the tower. The impression Joel had earlier that it resembled a great hornet's nest was strengthened when a flying creature issued from a hole at the base of the rock and darted downward like a busy insect. The creature had the hindquarters of a lion and the wings, head, and claws of a massive eagle. Joel watched it with fascination. Although he'd never seen one before, he

realized it was a griffon, a dangerous carnivore which, according to lore, could be trained as a mount if raised from a hatch-ling. The griffon settled on the roof of the tower, and a red-cloaked rider dismounted from its back.

As they approached the tower, Joel found that craning his neck to watch the floating temple became uncomfortable. Moreover, now he had to watch his footing. The ground about the tower was strewn with corpses of Banites and the missiles the giants had thrown at the Banite ship, which consisted of boulders and the fetid contents of the tower's midden.

Scavengers would feast well tonight on the garbage, though they'd have to share with the flies, which were already buzzing about it.

A second patrol of Zhentilar approached and surrounded their party as they steered toward the tower's doors.

Holly was muttering under her breath. Joel glanced in her direction. Her brow was furrowed and her eyes were mere slits.

"Are you all right?" the bard asked softly.

The paladin didn't reply immediately, but held up a hand to bid Joel to wait. A moment later she opened her eyes a little wider and answered, "There is so much maliciousness here it's giving me a headache. None of it is focused in one place—fortunately, I suppose. I was just finishing a prayer to Lathander for his strength."

Joel grunted softly. He hadn't thought of his own god since he awoke. He couldn't imagine how his prayers could be of any use in his current predicament.

The double doors of the tower were some twenty feet high, enough to accommodate the giants, constructed of hardwood reinforced with steel bands. The symbol of Zhentil Keep had once emblazoned the door, but the black and orange paint had long since peeled and flaked away. Nevertheless, Joel could still discern the shadow of a gauntlet and gem on the weathered wood.

The doors opened silently, and their captors rode into the courtyard, dragging their prisoners along. In the darkness that swallowed them, Joel could barely make out his surroundings. They were in an enclosed courtyard that ended before a second large doorway. Once through the second doorway, they found themselves in a dark, wide hallway. The Zhentilar dismounted beside a door that, from the smell of hay and manure, Joel guessed must lead to a stable. The priest of Xvim ordered four Zhentilar from the tower to take charge of the prisoners and follow him to the Godson's audience chamber.

As Joel and Holly were dragged down the dark hallway, Bear fell in step behind them. The priest led them up a staircase, down another hall, and through another set of doors.

Within was a great hall, running nearly the entire length of the fortress, its ceiling concealed in darkness above. The air was cloying with incense, burning torch smoke, and the smell of unwashed human bodies. Something else hung in the air, less substantial, but no less formidable. Joel finally recognized it. It was fear.

At the far end of the room was an amorphous statue of the god Iyachtu Xvim, ten feet high and carved out of oily black rock. There were no real features to the sculpture, just the suggestion of a man's form, but the eyes were set with two huge emeralds, which caught the torchlight and reflected it back with an evil glint. A high priest of Xvim sat on a low dais just to the left of his god's image. He wore elaborate black robes trimmed in green. Long, oily black hair oozed out from beneath the metal skullcap on his head. He hunched forward on his throne like a vulture, giving him the appearance of a more elderly man.

Clumped in a circle before the dais, guarded by warriors in black and green armor, were the pilgrims of Bane—those who had survived the attempt to storm the tower. Joel estimated there were about seventy of them. Between the

pilgrims and the dais stood another figure, a small, slender woman in black armor, with a black cape and a plait of ebon hair that hung to her waist. Although Joel could not see her face, he knew she was the same priestess of Bane he'd seen on the deck of the ship.

The Zhentilar guarding Joel and Holly hooked their chains to a ring against one wall and stood flanking them with disciplined precision. Bear stood before the prisoners, his once grim features now gloating unpleasantly. The Zhentilar priest, whose squad had captured them strode up to the dais and whispered to another priest who served as a scribe to the events unfolding.

The high priest of Xvim was addressing the Banite priestess. As he talked, the high priest rubbed his hands, as if trying to remove some stain from his flesh. The priestess stood as still as a statue, no movement betraying her feelings.

The penalty for trespass is severe, Walinda of Bane," the high priest declared in a deep, resonating voice.

The woman's voice was high-pitched but as chill as ice as she replied, "It is only trespass if permission is not given, and I am asking for that permission. The Temple in the Sky was once a temple to my dark lord, Bane. I believe that it still contains knowledge concerning an artifact that will serve him."

"Bane is dead," the high priest declared and spat on the dais.

True, Bane was defeated by Torm the Foolish during the Time of Troubles, but can a god be truly dead," the priestess Walinda answered, "when he lives on in the hearts of his worshipers?"

The high priest snorted. "If all that remains of his worshipers are a rabble of peasants led by a woman, Bane had best not bother to get up again," he taunted.

Several of the warriors in the room laughed. Walinda's back stiffened slightly, but she showed no other sign of

irritation. She held out an arm as a signal to one of the Banites behind her. "We have brought an offering as a sign of our good faith," she said, her voice still completely emotionless.

One of Bane's acolytes stepped forward, pulling a cloaked figure with him. With a rough shove, he pushed the figure forward, yanking away the cloak.

A woman in torn black leather armor sprawled on the floor before the dais. Her black hair gleamed like a raven's feathers, and her dark brown eyes flashed with fury, but it was the growths on her back that caught everyone's attention. Sprouting from behind her shoulders were great birdlike wings of dusty rose-colored feathers. The wings hung limp and unnaturally skewed. The winged woman tried to rise, but her strength failed her, and she collapsed back onto the stone floor. Her broken wings shuddered, shedding feathers. Then her whole body was still.

"More than a trifle, you must agree," Walinda of Bane said coolly. "She was a crew member aboard the ship that now serves as my shrine to Bane."

The high priest ran his tongue along his lower lip. "This one would make a suitable formal offering to the Godson," he said. He signaled with a jerk of his chin, and two of the black-and-green-clad warriors came forward and flanked the winged woman. They dragged her prostrate form out through the door.

"For such an offering, we will forgive you for your trespass," the high priest declared. "To gain access to the Temple in the Sky, however—that you must bargain for separately."

The priestess of Bane showed no sign of surprise that she'd been cheated out of her first offering, but she now bargained more carefully. "Name your price for access to the Temple in the Sky," she demanded.

The high priest chuckled, his deep voice reverberating from the stone walls all about them. "Your followers," he said

with a malicious smile. "Offer them up to the Godson, and we will allow you to visit the temple. Of course, you and your followers can leave now if the price is too high." His tone suggested he thought he had the better of the priestess. Walinda's reaching the Temple in the Sky might serve Bane, yet the destruction of these faithful few would seriously weaken the god's cause.

Walinda turned to face her followers, the acolytes in their handmade robes and the peasants in their rags. Many had been injured in the storming of the tower; all were hungry and tired from their travels. They stared back at her expectantly, but none uttered a sound. The blood-red tattoos on the priestess's pale cheeks glistened, and the ruby on her smooth brow flashed a bit of reflected light across Joel's eyes. The bard gasped softly, knowing somehow exactly what her decision would be.

Walinda looked directly at Joel, just as she had when he'd been cowering in the grass on the Tethyamar Trail. The ghost of a smile played across her lips.

"Agreed," she announced. "Give yourselves to the swords of the Godson, my children, and perish for the greater good of Bane."

Her last few words were lost in the confusion of the pilgrims, who cried out with astonishment and terror. The high priest of Xvim signaled with both hands, and the guards surrounding the pilgrims pulled their blades.

The acolytes knelt to pray to their dark god, and the Xvimist warriors' swords slit their throats effortlessly. The peasants were less accommodating and tried to bolt for freedom. They trampled over each other in the attempt, but there was no way to escape the blades of their executioners. They were being cut down like cattle.

Holly shouted, "No!" and yanked on the chain attached to the wall, trying to escape to stop the bloodshed.

The Zhentilar standing beside her smacked her in the head with a gauntleted fist and ordered her to be silent.

The paladin sagged against Joel, turning her face away from the massacre. Joel fixed his eyes on Walinda as her people's blood sprayed about the room. The priestess had stepped back to avoid the press of soldiers, but now she stood still, with her hands folded before her. She appeared completely untroubled by the carnage before her. On the contrary, Joel thought he detected a gleam in her eye and a brightness in her face, as if she had just won some noble victory.

One of the peasants broke free from the encircling death and threw himself at Walinda's feet begging, "Mercy, dread sister! Please have mercy!"

Walinda looked down at him as if he were a dog that needed to be put out of its misery. She made no movement or sound as a warrior of Xvim sliced off the peasant's head, splashing the priestess with her follower's blood. Her expression never changed.

A grayish haze, like smoke, rose from the dead and mingled with the scent of incense, the stench of blood, and the piteous moaning of the dying. The Xvimist warriors walked among the fallen, dispatching any who were merely wounded, until the gray haze rose from every individual offered up to Iyachtu Xvim.

The haze thickened into streams of smoke, which joined other streams until there were two rivers of darkness that moved toward the statue of Iyachtu Xvim, drawn there by some evil power. When the rivers of darkness struck the statue's emerald eyes, they were drawn inside the statue.

As the statue fed on the vapors, the corpses grew withered and desiccated, leaving their skin lying wrinkled about their bones. It was as if the Godson sucked out their flesh and blood.

Joel wondered if he had just witnessed the end of the last congregation of Bane's followers in Faerun. Certainly there weren't very many people who would convert to the worship of a dead god.

Jedidiah had once told Joel, "You are Finder's strength, and every follower you bring to him adds to that strength. Take care of yourself, and keep yourself strong for Finder's sake." The bard could imagine how horrified the old priest would be if those dead before him were the wasted faithful of the god Finder.

Walinda did not look as if she thought the sacrifice a waste. She turned back to the high priest and asked coolly, "Are you satisfied with the payment?"

"Well enough," the high priest replied, one hand patting his stomach as if he himself had feasted on the repast of death. He waved a hand. "Escort our guest, Walinda of Bane, to the Temple in the Sky."

Two of the guards stepped forward and flanked the priestess. Walinda seemed to glide between the guards as they marched her from the room. She did not look back.

"Next!" the high priest boomed.

The Zhentilar priest to whom Bear had delivered Joel stepped in front of the dais and spoke. "My novice from Daggerdale with another offering, O Ruinlord."

Bear nodded to the Zhentilar guard, who unlatched Joel and Holly from the ring on the wall. As Bear strode forward, the guards gave his prisoners a rough shove and fell in behind them.

Joel cast an eye at Holly as they were forced toward the dais. She appeared to be quite ill. Her breathing was shallow and her face gray. If the presence of evil had disturbed her before they had entered this place, she must now be suffering.

Bear skirted the corpses of the Bane worshipers, kicking aside the bones of the one who had begged Walinda for mercy. When he stood before the dais, he dropped to one knee. "Darkness falls," he intoned.

"And darkness rises again," the high priest responded impatiently. "Rise, Vermin Bear. What have you brought us?"

Bear stood up. "A paladin of Lathander, Ruinlord," he grunted, "and a priest of Finder."

The high priest laughed. "A priest of Finder? Moander's usurper has priests now?" he asked, sounding most amused.

The high priest's taunt did not exactly offend Joel, but it did annoy him. Rashly the bard spoke up. "Finder does indeed have priests," he announced. "Many of them. And they have many powerful friends in Daggerdale, who will soon discover that we have been kidnapped and send an army to our rescue. Then you'll have a taste of—"

Bear smacked his hand into Joel's mouth, sending the bard reeling backward. "Finder will have one less priest soon," the huge man growled. Joel shook his head slowly, trying to dispel the pain-induced fog that enveloped his head.

The high priest eyed the prisoners and reached out with his right hand and stroked the side of the lumpy statue of his god. Joel felt an unpleasant gripping sensation about his heart. It did not stop until the high priest pulled his hand away from the statue.

"Their souls are strong," the high priest whispered softly. Then he looked back to Bear and the Zhentilar priest. "Yes. They will make an excellent addition to the formal offering of the winged one. You have earned Xvim's favor. You may attend the sacrifice."

"I also bring word of Randal Morn's activities," Bear added. "The Rebel Lord is planning a string of attacks to drive the Zhentarim out of southern Daggerdale."

Joel noted with surprise how many words Bear could string together in one sentence. Too bad Randal Morn couldn't hear him now.

Fortunately, for the Rebel Lord at least, the high priest showed no interest in Bear's report. He gave a dismissive wave of his hand, saying, "That news matters little to us."

Joel felt a certain satisfaction seeing Bear's jaw drop. It took the big man several moments to form a reply. "But,

Ruinlord," he argued, "if Randal Morn takes the southern part of Daggerdale—"

"If he tries," the high priest interrupted, "it will be one more thing to trouble those Cyric-worshipping fools in Zhentil Keep. We followers of the Godson cannot concern ourselves with the plans of some petty dale lord."

Bear's mouth moved silently as the man tried to summon the courage to contradict his superior. In the end, he abandoned the attempt and muttered, "Yes, Ruinlord."

The high priest dismissed Bear's party with a wave of his hand. After making a hasty bow, Bear turned and strode from the room. The Zhentilar guards pushed Holly and Joel after him.

After the oppressive audience chamber, the air in the hallway felt delightfully cool and rich. The sense of release overwhelmed Joel, and he couldn't restrain himself. "Too bad, Bear!" he said. "You go to all that risk and put up with all those fools in Daggerdale just to bring back Morn's secret plans, and your high priest boss is a bigger clod than you are. I hope you're still around when Daggerdale takes this place so Morn can give you a taste of a dale dagger."

"Aye," Holly agreed.

Bear whirled about. Joel stood firm, mentally prepared, but the huge man did not strike him. Instead, an evil grin spread across the Xvimist's face. "In the darkness of the new moon, you will be sacrificed in a formal offering to the Godson. The Ruinlord will bring you pain such as you have never known before." Bear's eyes shone and his breathing quickened as he continued. "In the end, the Ruinlord will feed to you your beating heart. I have been granted the honor of watching. The Ruinlord may even allow me to participate. I am hoping for it."

Joel blanched, partly in fear, but partly, too, in disgust with Bear's delight. That Randal Morn's plans were not to be betrayed to the Zhentarim was cold comfort in light of the fate the bard and the paladin were soon to face.

Five The Priestess

The guards and Bear marched Holly and Joel through the corridors of the tower and up staircases until they had reached the roof. The sun had set, and it took Joel a few minutes to adjust to the darkness outside. Bear called to two men who were busy grooming a pair of griffons as the Zhentilar unfastened the manacles about the prisoners' hands and feet. It was then that Joel realized he and Holly were being taken to the Temple in the Sky.

The griffon riders came forward. Beneath the red capes they wore, they were clothed in tunics made of poorly tanned hides, decorated with a circular pattern of nine human eyes. Joel remembered Holly saying that the floating temple was occupied by a beast cult. Then was something far more sinister, though, about the pattern of eyes, but Joel couldn't quite place it.

"My master asks that you keep these prisoners in your temple until the new moon," Bear said. "They are meant for offerings, so be sure to tie them to their saddles so they do not try to jump."

Wordlessly each rider took a prisoner and led them toward the griffons. Joel noted that although the Zhentilar guard followed behind to prevent them from making a break for it, the soldiers avoided getting anywhere near the griffons. A moment later Joel understood why, as one griffon turned its great eagle head, shrieked, then snapped at the bard's face. The griffon's rider tapped the creature on the beak with his riding crop, and the raptor head followed the crop until the griffon faced forward again. From a pouch at his belt, the rider pulled out a piece of raw meat, dripping blood, and rewarded the mount.

The rider shoved Joel onto the creature's back and lashed his feet to its harness. When the rider mounted behind Joel,

the bard could feel the rumble in the griffon's chest as it complained of the extra weight. Joel looked for Holly, but the griffon and rider carrying her were already in the air.

A moment later Joel's ears were full of the sound of his griffon's beating wings, and he was airborne.

The waning moon still cast enough light to reveal features of the land below, the fields and forest, the tower, the clouds, the River Tesh glittering miles away. Joel studied the shape of the moon.

If he and Holly were to be sacrificed at the new moon, that gave them at least three more days to escape. He tried to focus on what the rider did to control the griffon, thinking such knowledge might come in handy if he could arrange an escape. The rider didn't seem to be giving the beast any instructions. Joel soon realized the griffon flew of its own volition, like a horse returning to its home stable, where it knew there would be food and water waiting.

All too soon the temple blocked out his view of the moon and the stars. The griffon flew through a great hole in the bottom of the floating rock. A few moments later they set down into a vast cavern lit by torchlight. The hole by which they'd entered was set in the floor of the cavern.

Joel could see two other griffons stabled in the cavern. They were being groomed by two other men, who also wore hide tunics marked with the pattern of eyes.

The riders untied the prisoners from their mounts and led them up a very long, frighteningly steep set of stairs. At the top of the stairs, Joel's guard shoved him to the left.

Holly cried out, "No!"

Joel spun about to see what was wrong. He just had time to see Holly being led off in the opposite direction when his guard smacked him across the face with his riding crop.

Joel shouted, "It's all right, Holly. I'll find you." The next moment the riding crop slammed into the bard's ear, so if the paladin called back a reply, Joel didn't hear it.

The corridors above the stables were all lit with a bright magical light. Everything was carved out of the rock, which appeared to be the same oily stone as had been used to create the statue of Iyachtu Xvim in the tower below.

At the bottom of a second staircase, his guard pushed him down a short dead-end corridor and slammed a gate closed behind him. Bedding in the cell consisted of some straw piled in the corner. The guard slipped two buckets through a hole in the gate's bars. One was empty, the other filled with water.

"Don't spill the water," the beast cultist ordered. "It's all you'll get until tomorrow night." From the pouch at his belt, he pulled out a piece of raw, bloody meat and tossed it at the bard's feet. Then he left the prisoner completely alone.

Joel looked down at the piece of meat and felt his stomach churn. He hadn't eaten for two days, but the raw flesh served as a reminder of the massacre of the Banites. Even if he could bring himself to sample it, the bard suspected he wouldn't be able to keep it down. He toed the meat into a corner, then sipped at the water in the bucket until his stomach settled.

He spent some time examining the gate that made up his cell door. He tried to give it a shake, but it didn't even rattle. It slid in grooves in the floor and the ceiling, and its sides disappeared into the rock walls. Whatever mechanism held it in place was also buried in the walls. The grillwork was solid iron.

Joel emptied out his pockets to take stock of his possessions. His captors had missed the hidden pocket in his belt, so he still had his map to the Lost Vale. They'd taken everything else but his clothing and boots. He could understand the Zhentilar taking his sword and dagger and, of course, the wand, but the fact that they'd taken his birdpipes really irritated him. He wondered whether Bear, no lover of music, had taken them and smashed them. It wasn't likely the Xvimist would try to play them. Joel chuckled just

at the thought of the big man's paws trying to cover the holes over the reeds.

Joel sat down on the straw and leaned against the wall. He'd only been conscious for a few hours, and between his hunger and his injuries, he felt exhausted. He thought of Holly, all alone in some cell, no doubt praying to Lathander.

"I don't imagine you're available to get me out of this predicament, are you, Finder?" the bard whispered. He began humming, and soon he was singing softly. Between the winged woman and the ride on the griffon, his thoughts were stuck on flight. He sang a song of Finder's about larks called "Birds Who Sing in Flight." For the first time, it occurred to him that the song could be interpreted to include people, too. It was the last thing he remembered before he drifted off to sleep.

When next Joel opened his eyes, Jedidiah stood leaning against the cell door, stuffing a short clay pipe with a fine black, sparkling powder. "Were you planning on sleeping the night away?" the old priest asked with a grin.

Joel was ready to spring up, embrace the old man, and tell him how glad he was to see him, but some powerful force held him down in the straw. That's when he realized he was dreaming. In his heart, he had wanted to see Jedidiah, so he summoned him in his sleep.

The old priest was dressed just as he had been when Joel had last seen him in Berdusk. He wore black boots and trousers, a white shirt, a red velvet tunic, and a huge dagger. His glaur, a valved brass horn, hung from his belt. His white beard was neatly trimmed, and his white hair was drawn back into a short ponytail.

"This place is abysmal," Jedidiah declared. "Believe me, I know." He kicked at the piece of raw meat on the floor. "The food is terrible, and the room doesn't even have a view."

When Joel finally managed to speak, his voice sounded remote even to himself. "I'm sorry, Jedidiah," he said, "but I've failed. I'm not going to be able to complete my

pilgrimage to the Lost Vale. I've been captured by priests of Iyachtu Xvim, and they're going to sacrifice me to their god. They're going to sacrifice Holly, too. She's a paladin of Lathander."

"There," the old man said, pointing at a spot on the solid wall behind Joel. Joel wondered in confusion whether the priest didn't hear him or he was ignoring him.

Jedidiah lit his pipe and tossed it at the wall where he'd just pointed. There was a great flash of light and an explosive boom, and when the smoke cleared, a large, perfectly shaped window had appeared in the rock. On the other side, there were blue skies, white clouds, and bright sunshine.

Jedidiah sprang across the room to the far wall and leapt up onto the windowsill. With hands on either side of the window, he leaned out over the void. "Much better," he said. "It's not such a dead end now."

Joel marveled as he always did at Jedidiah's spryness and daring. The innumerable creases on his brow, about his eyes, and in the corners of his mouth marked the old priest as ancient, yet he was as strong and energetic as a boy.

Jedidiah sat down on the windowsill and pulled out a second pipe from his tunic and tapped the bowl on the sill until a huge chunk of tobacco spilled out. In the tobacco was a white egg.

"They're going to kill me," Joel reiterated.

"Only if you let them," Jedidiah said. He tapped on the egg. Something within tapped back.

"I haven't a chance of escaping," Joel argued.

Jedidiah laughed. It was the same laugh he used for overly self-important musicians. "You have to look for chances," he said, tapping on the eggshell again.

The shell cracked open, and a tiny golden warbler popped out of the shell. The bird grew at an impossible rate until it had reached full adult size. Then it peeped and flew up to Jedidiah's hand.

"I'm locked in a cell, in a floating rock filled with beast cultists, a half mile off the ground!" Joel complained.

Jedidiah looked out the window. "A quarter mile," he retorted. He whistled at the warbler, and the bird sang back seven notes.

"So even if I break out of this cell, how do I get down off this rock?" Joel asked, beginning to feel quite irritated at Jedidiah's casual air in the face of Joel's impending doom.

"You don't get down off a rock; you get down off a goose," the old priest teased.

With an amazing sleight of hand that Joel had seen the priest use before, Jedidiah passed one hand over the golden bird and transformed it into a piece of golden jewelry, no larger than his palm, shaped like a pair of wings. When the priest passed his hand back over the talisman, it transformed back into the golden warbler. The bird sang one more time, then launched itself out the window.

As the bird flew off, Joel felt his heart lighten. Jedidiah laughed, and Joel felt his exhaustion draining away, replaced with a youthful energy. Of course he would escape, he thought. Of course he would rescue Holly. Of course he would reach the Lost Vale.

"Of course," Jedidiah said, "you're never going to get anything done sleeping your life away." The priest bent down and poked Joel on the forehead for emphasis. Joel felt a jolt pass through his body.

Joel awoke with a start, sitting up immediately in the straw bedding. He blinked and looked around. Jedidiah wasn't there, of course, and the cell looked just as it had before his dream.

He sat and thought about the dream for a few minutes. It could just have been his heart playing tricks on his mind, offering escape in sleep when there was none in life. Yet the dream had seemed so real. For one thing, he recalled it vividly ... the exploding pipe, the window, the newly hatched bird, the winged talisman. Of course, Jedidiah had been

annoyingly vague, but he was that way in real life as well. The view from the window though hadn't been quite right. The cell was far too deep inside the rock to command an outside view.

There was something rather peculiar about the way the hallway dead-ended on nothing but a prison cell. Why not just excavate a cell? Why add a hallway? Unless ...

Jedidiah had said something about it not being such a dead end.

Joel knelt in the straw and examined the wall where Jedidiah had created a window. The stone was oily and quite roughly hewn. A chunk broke off in his hand. Curious, Joel tossed the rock in the air. Although it came from the floating rock fortress, it did not float of its own accord. The cell was well lit by the same magical light that illuminated everything, but it was still hard to examine the blackness of the wall. The rough surface cast shadows over each crack and niche. Joel ran a piece of straw horizontally across the stone. It stuck in a shadowed crevice. Joel ran the straw up vertically. There was definitely a crack there. Just at the edge of his reach, the crack took a sharp ninety-degree turn.

Ultimately the crack formed a perfect rectangle exactly where the window had been in Joel's dream. Had the dream actually been a vision? the bard wondered.

Joel cast a glance back down the corridor, but it was empty. His jailers, trusting the strength of the cell, hadn't posted a guard.

Joel pushed gently along the seam, but the rock didn't move. The opening could be mortared shut, secured with some secret mechanism, or merely stiff from disuse.

The Rebel Bard placed his shoulder against the stone and pushed with all his weight. Something made a rusty, grinding noise, and the wall shifted, just a fraction. The seam was now a clear divot, an inch deep, with a similar-sized rise on the far edge of the doorway. The section of wall pivoted about a central post.

Joel pushed harder, and now the wall moved more easily. Black dust showered down from the top of the door, creating a dirty waterfall that billowed in clouds near the floor before settling. Joel brushed the black dust off his tunic before poking his head into the space he'd just discovered.

Behind the door, the air was fresh and cool, which could indicate there was another exit. It was dark, though, pitch-black, and full of cobwebs, which could mean no one else used the door or even knew about its existence. Wrapping his cloak around his hand and sweeping the air before him, Joel half stepped, half crawled into the passage beyond.

Something glittered on the floor just beyond the door. Joel bent over and picked it up. Black dust had drifted into the finely carved lines, delineating each tiny feather. It was a tiny set of golden wings, no bigger than his palm—the same talisman Jedidiah had held in Joel's vision!

Joel considered the source of the vision. Could it really have been Finder who sent him the dream of Jedidiah? With a sense of embarrassment, the bard recalled how he had questioned whether his god could get him out of this predicament. A sense of awe crept over him to think that the Nameless Bard might actually be paying attention to him, a priest who doubted his own calling and hadn't the sense to avoid being kidnapped by Xvimists.

"Thank you, Finder. Thank you very much," Joel whispered, hoping fervently that his god heard his gratitude as readily as he'd listened to his doubts.

The Rebel Bard blew the dust from the talisman and slipped it into an inner pocket of his tunic. Then he began to feel his way through the darkness behind his cell.

Beyond the secret door was a corridor going off in the same direction as the one that led to Joel's cell. The priestess, Walinda of Bane, had declared that the Temple in the Sky had once been a temple of Bane. Apparently when the floating rock had changed owners, many of the old passages had been closed off and forgotten.

The illumination from the cell extended only a few yards into the passageway. Beyond that, darkness reigned. Joel was forced to hug the wall, brushing away cobwebs, testing each footstep carefully before moving forward. He reached a corner in the corridor. It formed a T branching off to the right and left. Joel chose the direction in which the cultists had dragged Holly. Then the corridor turned again, and ebon blackness, like a velvet hood, fell over his eyes. His movement slowed. Then his foot sensed a void.

Joel knelt and reached down with his hand. The floor dropped only a few inches. It was a step down. Beyond the step, Joel felt another step. But how many were there? And what was at the bottom of the steps? These corridors could be a maze, the bard thought, with traps and pits. Maybe there were rats and giant spiders.

Despite the cool breeze moving through the tunnel, Joel began to sweat, perspiration beading on his forehead and carving thin rivulets down his dusty face. I really could use a light, he thought.

Then he remembered. He could make light. Jedidiah had taught him how. He'd never needed to use it before. Now was probably a good time. The bard composed himself and began the prayers that would bring him the gift of spells from his god. When he had finished, he ran his hand over the wall until he'd broken off another chunk of rock. Joel focused on the rock as he hummed a scale in C-sharp. The rock lit up like a lantern wick, and Joel leaned back with a sigh of relief.

A few moments later he was on his way down the staircase, continuing roughly in the direction Holly had been taken. There were other intersections, but the corridor he was in now was larger than the corridors that connected to it, and Joel sensed they were merely tributaries. If he didn't find some sort of room or exit, he could always go down one of the smaller corridors when he reached the opposite side of the temple. With a grin, the bard imagined himself

pushing open another secret door into a cell containing Holly.

The tunnel ended in a cavern that Joel guessed must have once served as a temple to Bane. Within, rows of benches faced an altar on the left-hand wall. On the opposite wall was another corridor leading away from the temple.

Joel moved down the center aisle of benches up to the altar. There were rings set in the four corners of the altar stone and troughs running to a hole at one end of the stone. Even in the dim light, Joel could see bloodstains in the stone.

Behind the altar, carved into the rock wall, was a giant bas-relief of a man's face. Unlike the rough-hewn statue of Iyachtu Xvim below, this figure was the work of a skilled artisan. The face's smooth, sharp features were handsome but hostile, a traditional representation of the god Bane. There were two divots in the eye sockets that traditionally would hold giant red gems to represent the icon's eyes. No doubt someone had looted this icon's eyes.

Thinking of people who might have the nerve to desecrate a temple to Bane, Joel was reminded of Holly. It occurred to him he'd better continue searching for her before the night wore away. The bard gave the icon of Bane a little slap on its rocky cheek and turned to leave. Just as he was stepping off the altar, he heard a sneeze behind him.

Joel started and then froze. He could hear his own heart pounding in his chest. It was several moments before he gathered his wits about him and reacted. Pocketing his magically lit rock, he ducked behind the altar and listened.

A few moments later he heard two more sneezes. They probably were soft and stifled, but in the echoing rock chamber they might as well have been thunder. On his hands and knees, Joel crept around the altar in the direction of the sounds.

To the right of the altar was a curtained alcove. Light slipped out from beneath the curtain and through rotted holes in the fabric. He'd missed it before because his own light stone had outshone it. This light was not as bright as the magical light that lit the corridors used by the cultists, nor was it the flickering light of a torch or a lantern. Rather, it was a soft, constantly glowing luminescence, like his own light stone but even less bright. Someone else was down here, someone with magic.

Joel crawled up to the curtain and put his eye to one of the holes. Beyond the curtain was a small alcove housing a massive tome chained to an iron stand. Leaning over the book was the familiar form of Walinda of Bane. Using a gemstone enchanted with a light spell for illumination, the priestess skimmed page after page with an impatient look on her face.

Joel was just about to back away when a waft of breeze brushed the curtain up against his face. The priestess's head jerked up, and she turned to stare straight at Joel just as she had twice before. Joel froze. She's in the light; I'm in the dark. She can't possibly see me, the bard thought.

The priestess leapt toward the curtain with a curse on her lips. Still on his hands and knees, Joel tried rolling sideways into the darkness, but to no avail. Carrying her light with her, the priestess cornered him against the altar. With a curse on her lips, she held out her right hand. A blue flame flickered in her palm.

"Hey, take it easy," Joel cried out. "I was just looking. No harm done."

"Oh, it's only you," the priestess replied. The hostile look on her face was replaced with one of cool indifference, and the flame in her hand died out. "I thought you'd be dead by now," she added.

"Who, me?" Joel asked, feigning nonchalance. "Whatever gave you that idea, Walinda of Bane?"

Walinda's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "It occurs to me you have the advantage of knowing my name. Might know yours?"

The bard stood up and brushed the dirt from his hands. "I'm Joel," he said, offering his hand. "Joel of Finder."

The priestess ignored the bard's hand. "Finder," she said with a nod. "Ahh ... of course. The poppinjay bard who slew Moander to become a petty god."

The priestess stepped back. "As a priest of a rival god, albeit a petty one," she noted, "you will be sacrificed by the Xvimists in the dark of the moon beside the harpy I offered to them. You may have temporarily escaped your prison cell through these tunnels, but eventually the cultists will find you. Swear fealty to me, and I will help you escape the cultists," Walinda offered. The expression on her face softened, and her tone of voice was suddenly warm and sincere. Joel was taken aback, not only by the priestess's offer, but by the sudden urge he had to accept it just to please her. Had she tried to ensorcell him with a charm spell? But if Bane was dead, she couldn't cast any spells... unless she had used some sort of magical amulet. But why? Why betray her hosts to help a priest of what she considered to be a minor poppinjay god?

Joel grinned with sudden insight. "I will if you will," he retorted.

Walinda glared at him. "What folly do you speak?" she demanded.

"Well," Joel replied, "if you were really a guest of the cultists, you wouldn't need me and my fealty. You'd just give a shout and have them put me in another prison cell. When I sneaked up on you, though, you had no idea I wasn't a cultist, yet you were prepared to attack me. Now that I think about it, the deal you made with the Ruinlord of Xvim only guaranteed you access to this place. Nothing was said about granting you passage back down to the ground. You're a prisoner here, too. Not much of a deal maker, are you?"

"I'm a Dreadmaster of Bane, the Dark One, first among his priests," Walinda replied haughtily, "not some merchant scum. You are wrong. I am not a prisoner. I wheeled to attack in case you were some fell beast left wandering these passages as a guardian of this abandoned temple. Now accept my offer, or die soon regretting that you did not."

Joel chuckled, unable to hide his amusement. She was good at bluffing, but she still had no reason to help him unless she needed his help. "Thanks, no," he replied. "I've seen how little you value those who've sworn fealty to you."

"My followers," Walinda said softly. Her lip quivered, and she turned away.

Joel was surprised. He'd expected her to react with contempt for her people, or even anger that he'd raised the subject. Instead, she acted as if she genuinely grieved their loss. Of course, the bard reminded himself, she could simply be a good actress.

After a moment the woman straightened and replied proudly, "You would not think I sold them so cheap if you knew how great was my goal." She turned again to face him. "My god demanded I gain entry to this place, and I obeyed. Even though their sacrifice brought power to Bane's bastard son, they have earned the favor of Bane. Their loyalty and the price they paid for it will not be forgotten."

Joel shifted his weight nervously from one foot to the other. "I know this must be a sore point, and I really hate to have to bring it up, but isn't Bane, um, dead?"

Walinda smiled. It was a smile of great joy, and it made her face positively lovely. "Bane is a god. Death can have no power over the gods. He will return."

"All right," Joel said slowly, beginning to sense this was not a topic they could sensibly debate.

"You doubt me, Joel of Finder," Walinda said. "Tell me, if everyone told you Finder was dead, would you believe it?"

"For me it's different. I have proof Finder lives; he grants my spell prayers."

"Are you so certain that Bane does not grant mine?"

Joel remembered the blue flame at her palm. "You probably just have some sort of magical talisman."

"That is a possibility. At any rate, suppose Finder did not grant you spells, yet still he spoke to you?" Walinda asked.

Joel took a deep breath, then breathed out. Hearing the voice of her god might be some madness of Walinda's, but having just received a vision from Finder, Joel hardly felt in a position to argue with her. Still, the alternative, that Bane might return, was too unpleasant to think about.

"It is true," the priestess admitted, "that I have been made a prisoner by the cultists, yet Bane foresaw this when he bade me to come here. This temple was once his, and he has told me all its secrets. It was a simple matter to escape from my cell to search for the information my god bade me to seek.

"Which is?" Joel asked, curious despite himself.

Walinda smiled again, and her eyes glittered with excitement. Once again her face appeared quite lovely. Then the smile faded to a smirk. "You are most curious, little poppinjay," the priestess noted. "No doubt your curiosity led you to find a way from your cell."

"Maybe Finder told me how to escape," Joel suggested. "The same as Bane told you."

Walinda glared at the bard, obviously finding the comparison between her god and his distasteful. "Perhaps I should simply betray you to the cultists in exchange for my freedom," she said.

Joel leaned against the bloodstained altar, appearing as casual as he could. "You could try," he agreed amicably. The priestess had been prepared to attack him with some sort of spell. Whether Bane had granted it or not was moot at this point. He had no combat magic or weaponry at his disposal, which she probably guessed. Still, if she didn't subdue him quickly with magic, he could no doubt overcome her with brute strength.

With cold smiles, each priest eyed the other warily, Finally Walinda said, "Yet the cultists cannot be trusted to honor a bargain. Perhaps, since neither of us seems inclined to kill the other, we should ally with one another against the cultists in order to escape from this place."

Joel rubbed his hand against the stubble on his chin, debating the wisdom of such an act.

"You are slave to a petty god who will one day be crushed by the Dark Lord," Walinda declared, "yet I will swear by Bane that if you aid me, I will aid you, and not raise my hand against you until we have escaped from this rock."

"I have a companion I have to rescue," Joel informed her.

Walinda's eyes narrowed. "The girl dressed in the colors of a Lathanderite?" she asked.

"That's her," Joel replied.

"Lathander is the sworn enemy of Bane."

"I'm not leaving without her," Joel insisted.

"When she looked at me, her eyes were full of hate," the priestess said. "Would she be willing to honor our truce?"

Holly, Joel realized, would not be happy about allying with Walinda, but she was a reasonable girl. Surely, he told himself, the paladin could restrain her enmity if it meant a chance to escape certain death at the hands of the Xvimists. He was sure he could convince her.

Was he himself convinced an alliance was a good idea? There were several points in its favor. It was only temporary. Once he'd found Holly, the two of them would outnumber the priestess should she attempt to betray them. If Walinda really did know all the secrets of this place, she would be useful. Alternatively, Walinda was a woman who had willingly sacrificed her own followers. She was probably the torturer and murderer of the great black-skinned creature she had used as a figurehead on her ship. Joel knew he not only shouldn't trust her, but he should despise her.

Yet he held a grudging respect for the priestess. To walk into this proverbial dragon's den had taken more than

courage or foolhardiness. The woman was devoted to her god. Joel wondered if he would ever show himself as worthy of Finder as she had proven herself to Bane. Until he knew the answer, he felt a curious tie to the priestess, as if only she could help him discover it.

"I agree," he answered at last. "We have a truce, you and I, until we escape. We will aid each other. You will help me rescue my companion, and I will ensure she keeps the bargain as well." Joel paused, then remembered it was to be an oath. "I swear this in Finder's name," he added.

Walinda bowed. Despite the plate armor encasing her figure, the bard couldn't help being impressed with how slender and graceful the woman was. She replied, "And I, too, declare that we have a truce, you and I, and your companion, should we rescue her, until we are well clear of the Temple of the Sky and the Flaming Tower. I vow this in the name of the mightiest of gods, Lord Bane, who sleeps, waiting for his faithful to come to him."

And may he wait a long, long time, Joel thought privately. Aloud he asked, "So what now?"

"Keep watch, Poppin, while I complete my research. I shall not be very much longer," the priestess said. Then she returned to the book in the alcove.

Joel watched her for a few minutes as she skimmed the pages of the book, apparently oblivious to his presence. Either she really trusted him now because he'd made an oath, or she did not perceive him to be any threat to her. The smile had returned to her face, and Joel found himself enchanted by the beauty of her features.

A voice inside chided him. Stop being an idiot. The less you look at her, the safer you'll be. The bard began pacing back and forth before the alcove, anxious to get going and free Holly. He thought of leaving Walinda to search for Holly himself, but realized it was far more reasonable to wait, since the priestess knew her way around.

From the alcove, Walinda whispered, "Yes. At last."

Joel poked his head into the alcove. Removing a tiny blade from inside her bracers, Walinda began slicing pages out from the chained book. Something dark and liquid oozed from the cut edges that remained and pooled and clotted in the book's spine.

"It's—it's bleeding," Joel gasped.

Walinda looked up at the bard as she carefully folded the stolen leaves. "If you put your ear close," she said "you can hear it weep as well. A sweet sound ... but we must go." She slid the paper beneath her breastplate and swept out of the alcove.

Joel turned away from the book with a shudder and hurried after his newly pledged ally.

Walinda led the bard down the corridor opposite the one he'd arrived by. She turned down the third side passage on the left, a route Joel might have avoided. The tunnel was deteriorated and difficult to traverse. They were forced to climb over rockfalls, crawl under low ceilings, and balance on thin ledges in places where most of the tunnel floor had collapsed into deep, dark chasms. Oily water seeped from the wall and ceiling and made the floor slick. Despite all the difficulties, Walinda didn't seem the least bit uncertain, not even when they reached a dead end.

"Here" she said, touching a section of the wall. "Push here," she ordered Joel.

Joel put his shoulder to the wall and shoved hard. The seam became a crack, but something within the wall squealed alarmingly.

"Wait!" Walinda whispered urgently. She stepped up beside Joel and set her hands on the center of the door where it pivoted. She murmured words Joel did not recognize. Then she stepped back and said, 'Try it now.'

Joel pushed again. In his bones, he could feel the grating of rust and iron, but no noise came from the shifting wall.

The door opened into an all-purpose storage room, lit with bright magical light. Cuts of meat hung from the

ceiling. Rope, wood, hides, jugs, and other items were stacked all about. Walinda led Joel past a pair of butchering tables to a firepit, which seemed to serve as a makeshift smithy. The ashes within were cold at the moment. On the wall beyond the smithy hung all manner of weapons, most of which were in poor shape, rusted or broken, but some appeared quite serviceable.

"We must arm ourselves," the priestess explained, "before we rescue your companion."

Joel took a short sword and a dagger for himself. Choosing a weapon for Holly was more difficult. There was nothing on the wall like the curved blade that had been her father's. The bard picked out two different swords for the paladin, so she could select whichever was more comfortable. He also snagged her a crossbow and a quiver of bolts.

Walinda selected a mace and a thick-headed metal club. She grinned at his weapon-bedecked figure. "You are the very image of a holy warrior, Poppin," she teased. "Come. Your companion should be in a prison cell nearby. We will make better time if we move through the main hall, but we must be very quiet."

Walinda made for the storeroom's regular door and opened it just enough to peer out. She waved him forward and slipped through the doorway. Joel padded after her.

The bard had barely cleared the archway when he slammed into Walinda, who was backing up swiftly.

The priestess turned and forced him back into the storeroom. She pressed him against the wall just inside the doorway, whispering, "Hush! Don't move. Don't even breathe." She opened her long black cape and wrapped it around the pair of them.

Joel froze as Walinda pressed herself up against him. He could have sworn he felt her heart pounding even through her breastplate. Joel was wondering what could possibly have frightened the icy priestess when he saw it.

Floating toward the storeroom in complete eerie silence was a great sphere, bristling with eyestalks that swayed like snakes. It drooled yellow ichor from a fanged mouth at the center of its spherical body.

Joel hoped the cloak had some magical property that hid them, for they stood not in the shadows, but out in the open in a lighted room. He offered up a short, silent prayer to Finder in case it did not. As he remained still and breathless, he became uncomfortably aware of the rose scent of Walinda's hair and the sensation of her hands clenching his shoulders.

The many-eyed creature drifted just outside the doorway and began muttering to itself in some unknown language. It was too big around to squeeze through the doorway. A minute later it drifted away.

Walinda relaxed her grip on Joel's shoulders and backed away. Her cloak fell from him, but her scent lingered. She brushed back a stray wisp of hair and readjusted her cloak.

"What was that?" Joel whispered.

"An eye tyrant," Walinda replied softly. "Some call it a beholder. The beast cultists are so debased they worship it. Bane warned me of its presence here, that it was the greatest danger I could face."

"Great," Joel whispered sarcastically. "I don't suppose Bane happened to mention how you were supposed to get down to the ground."

"Lord Bane is all-wise and all-powerful," the priestess retorted. "He told me I would find you, Poppin, and that you would find a way to escape from here."

Six The Winged Woman

Holly kept an eye on the woman sleeping on the straw in the corner. The cultists had shoved the paladin into the same cell as the winged woman the priestess of Bane had

offered the Xvimists. The woman had not stirred upon the paladin's arrival or since then. Holly waited patiently, knowing rest was a crucial part of healing, not to mention a temporary escape from cares. Like any Daggerdale girl worth her keep, she'd learned something of the healer's art long before she'd accepted the calling to paladinhood. That knowledge added immensely to her success when calling on healing powers from her god. She sat beside the woman, visually examining her injuries, mentally preparing a list of things she would need to do to restore her to health.

For the most part, the wounds on the woman's flesh, while undoubtedly painful, were minor, the work of a skilled torturer intent on keeping the victim alive a long time. It was the damage to the woman's wings that worried Holly more. They dangled at odd angles. The ulna and radius of both wings had been broken, one snapped, the other crushed. The humerus of the right wing had been dislocated from the woman's back. Several of the primary and secondary feathers had been plucked away. The covert feathers on one wing were scorched and curled, probably by a hot iron poker.

Holly could imagine how the torture had gone, but she pushed that thought aside. It wasn't until the woman began to thrash and cry out in her sleep that Holly decided waking her might be more merciful than letting her sleep. She reached out and shook the woman's shoulder gently but firmly, saying, "Wake up. It's all right. You're only dreaming."

The woman's eyes opened, and she glared at Holly for several moments before she seemed to get her bearings. "Who in the nine hells are you?" she demanded.

"Holly Harrowslough," the girl replied. "I'm a prisoner like yourself."

"That's too bad," the woman muttered. She sat up; her face contorted in agonizing pain as the bones in her wings twisted about. "I'm Jas," she said between clenched teeth. "Short for Jasmine. Just call me Jas."

"I can heal your wings," Holly said.

Jas's eyes narrowed, reappraising the girl before her. "What are you, some priest acolyte?" she asked.

"I'm a paladin of the Order of the Aster, Protectors of Lathander's church," Holly explained.

"A paladin. No tour of Toril would be complete without one," the winged woman muttered sarcastically. Try curing that nasty bruise on your face," Jas said, pointing to the mark left by the Zhentilar's gauntlet. "I might be a little more than you can handle."

"I'm not hurt as badly as you," Holly argued. "And I have healed wings before—the wings of birds, that is. I bow how crucial it is to arrange the bones correctly. A wing healed crooked doesn't fly."

"A paladin healing broken birdie wings. It fits somehow," Jas said.

"Not just any birds," Holly explained patiently. "Pigeons and hawks. My people use them as messenger birds in our fight against the Zhentarim." "What difference does it make?" Jas snarled. "They're going to kill us anyway."

"Well, I was working on the assumption that we would escape once you were healed," Holly snapped, "but if you would rather try to escape in that condition ... Unless, of course, you aren't interested in escaping."

Jas shrugged and grimaced at the pain it caused her.

"I realize it seems hopeless, but that could just be the pain overcoming your will," Holly argued. "Please, let me try."

Jas sighed. "Go ahead, kiddo, if it'll make you happy."

Holly knelt behind Jas. She removed the tattered remnants of the cape that hung between Jas's wing and set it aside. As gently as she could, she raised the woman's right wing and aligned the broken bones. The bones were as light as a bird's, the feathers soft and warm.

Jas whimpered, despite her tough manner, and her eyes welled with tears. Quickly Holly whispered a prayer to Lathander. The rosy dawn-colored light about her hands

buried themselves in the pink feathers, and the cracked bones knit together in a perfectly straight line. With great pleasure, Holly watched pinfeathers grow at a magical rate, filling in the spaces left by the plucked primary and secondary feathers. Without pause, the paladin proceeded to work on the left wing.

The crushed bones were harder to manipulate into place. Jas grunted. Her teeth were clenched so tightly together the muscles in her jawline were twitching from the strain. As soon as she'd healed this set of bones with a second prayer to her god, Holly twisted the wing, gave it a sharp tug, and pushed it back into the socket in Jas's back. A final prayer healed the swelling about the joint.

The winged woman gave a sigh of relief and lay bad down on the straw. She was drenched in sweat, but her suffering was greatly alleviated. She turned her head to look up at the paladin.

"Thanks," she said.

"You're welcome," Holly said with a weak grin. Worry over the woman's agony, combined with her own aches and pains, had nearly exhausted the girl. She leaned back against the cell wall and mopped her dark brow with her sleeve.

Jas sat up again, then stood. Gingerly she began spreading her wings. When no pain manifested itself, the woman flared the wings out to their full span. The pinion feathers grazed the sides of the cell. A breeze ran across the floor and sent straw swirling about the room.

Holly watched with delight. She thought the wings were beautiful. It wasn't until Jas lowered them that the girl focused on the woman herself.

Jas was smaller than Holly and quite slender, but beneath her torn black leather leggings and jerkin, her muscles were as firm as a warrior's. Her short, dark hair framed a pale pink face. A longer strand of bangs curled between her milky brown eyes.

Despite their soft color, there was something hard about Jas's eyes. They reminded Holly of the cold, impassive expressions she'd seen on the faces of the Daggerdale warriors who were tired of fighting but unwilling to do anything else. It was a look that made Holly sad.

Jas held out her hand. "Pleased to meet you, Holly. You from around these parts?"

Holly grasped the woman's wrist in the fashion of dalesfolk, noting the sinewy, tough muscles in her right arm. The winged woman's arm twitched slightly in surprise, but then she responded by grasping Holly's wrist.

"I'm from Daggerdale," the paladin replied. "That's just south of here. Joel's from Berdusk."

"Joel?" Jas asked with a raised eyebrow.

"We were abducted together. He's a priest of Finder."

"Finder? That's one I've never heard of," Jas said.

"He's a new god. He was a bard who destroyed Moander and took the Darkbringer's power. His people are supposed to be renewing art, encouraging it to grow and change."

"Dandy," Jas said as she examined the cell door. "Drawbolt and crossbar. Simple and effective," she muttered. She gave the bars of the door an angry shake. "I guess a pickable lock would be too much to expect from groundlings. So who's this Cynic guy the Banites talked about?" she asked Holly.

"Cyril," Holly corrected. "He took Bane's position when Torm killed Bane. Then Cyril went mad. That's when Bane's son Iyachtu Xvim seized Bane's power. That's who they're going to sacrifice us to—Iyachtu Xvim."

Jas began sweeping her hands over the rough walls of the cell, giving experimental shoves every few feet. "I leave for a few years and the whole pantheon changes," she muttered. "Are you sure Bane's dead? That priestess witch seemed pretty sure of herself. I know she was casting spells. It took plenty of magic to bring down my crew." Her eyes burned with anger at the memory.

"It must have been some trick," Holly insisted "Everyone knows Bane is dead. What happened to your crew?"

"They're all dead. After that Bane bitch stole my ship, she tortured them to death. Johenri, Thordis, Gildstar, and my first mate, Arandes. Arandes lasted for six days. He was a tough old giff. They stripped off his skin and used him for a figurehead until his heart finally let go." Jas stopped her exploration and leaned her forehead against the wall. Holly could tell from the way her back shook that the winged woman was stifling her sobs.

"We found your friend's body," Holly said softly. "The dalesfolk gave him a proper burial."

Jas didn't reply, but she returned to examining the walls, only now her shoves on the stone were more forceful.

"So that floating ship was yours?" Holly asked.

"Floating ship? You mean the nautiloid. It doesn't just float. It can fly. It can sail the phlogiston between the spheres, something, fortunately, that the groundling thieves who stole it can't comprehend. Yes, the nautiloid's mine. I took it from the illithids."

"Illithids?" Holly asked.

"I believe you groundlings call them mind flayers," Jas said.

"The creatures that devour people's brains?" Holly asked.

Jas nodded. "The illithids destroyed the hull of my dragonfly ship, so my crew and I took one of the illithids' miniature nautiloid hulls as payment. The illithids weren't keen on making reparations, though, so they fired on us as we were leaving. That's why the ship's hull is so busted up. It's still spaceworthy, though. We landed here to take on supplies." Having finished examining the walls to no effect, Jas dusted off her hands.

"We were headed for Shadowdale," Jas continued, "but just over the Spiderhaunt Woods, something attacked Gildstar while he was at the helm. The ship came crashing down in the trees. That's when we got into a fight with the

Banites. Like I said, that priestess used magic to bring us down. There was also something else with her—something powerful and evil that kept to the shadows."

Holly was reminded of the evil she'd sensed in Daggerdale when the nautiloid ship had floated past her.

"Well, I can't find a way out of this cell," Jas announced. "I hope you've got some ideas. Otherwise we're going to be food for this baby god of Bane's."

"Iyachtu Xvim." Holly supplied the name.

"Sounds like the noise Arandes made when he was clearing his throat," Jas commented scornfully, without a trace of humor. "So do you have some way out of here with your dawn-god powers?"

"I have a plan," Holly explained, "but if it works, I still have to search for Joel."

"All right," Jas said, "but if it takes too long, I'm blowing this mud ball without you."

"Fine," Holly agreed. Jas, she suspected, would not run from a fight, but she was the sort to get antsy if the search lasted the whole night.

It took Holly five minutes of shrieking and frantic shaking of the bars before one of the cultists came to the cell door.

"She's not moving," Holly cried hysterically, waving at the cloak-covered figure lying in the straw. "She puked up all this black stuff, and now she's not moving."

The cultist, obviously roused from a solid sleep, stared wordlessly into the cell. The paladin spent another three minutes of desperate weeping and terror-filled shouting before the guard turned and left the cell door. Holly screamed after him until he returned with two more cultists. All three were armed with drawn swords.

Holly gave an inward sigh of relief. It was unfortunate that the cultist was cautious enough to go for reinforcements, but at least he wasn't about to risk the displeasure of the Xvimist by letting their chosen sacrifice die unattended.

Motioning with his sword, one cultist ordered Holly, "Stay back."

The paladin backed into the rear left corner of the cell, trying to appear as unthreatening as possible. The cultists unlocked and opened the barred door. One of them stood in the doorway, yawning, while the other two stepped into the cell. One stepped up to Holly with his sword pointed at her chest. The other approached the pile of straw and poked at the caped figure with his sword. When there was no response, he kicked at the figure.

"What the—" he growled, reaching down and yanking Jas's cloak from the straw. "There's nobody here!" he shouted.

The cultist guarding Holly turned his head, and in that moment, Holly lunged forward. With both hands, she grabbed at his wrist, forcing his blade out and downward, then slammed her right foot into the inside of his right knee. With a howl, the cultist crashed to the ground.

The cultist at the door moved into the cell with his sword aimed at Holly, not realizing the threat to him came from

above. Jas dropped down from the gargoyle-like perch on the ledge above the door and rammed into his head with both feet, sending him reeling into the opposite wall.

The cultist beside the straw wheeled about just in time for Jas to smack him in the head with the water bucket. Before he could recover, the winged woman had closed in, jammed the bucket on his head and kned him hard in the groin. He didn't put up a struggle as she wrenched the sword from his hand. Jas thrust the blade into his throat, then yanked the weapon back out.

Holly stomped on the wrist of the cultist lying sprawled out before her and began prying his fingers from his sword's hilt. With an animal snarl, the man rolled toward the paladin, grabbed her wrist, and sunk his teeth into her arm.

Holly screamed, but she couldn't kick at him without losing her balance. Jas whirled about. She slid her blade under his neck and sliced upward. The man released his grip on Holly's arm to grab at his throat and gasped for air. Holly yanked her arm back and clutched it to her chest.

Holly eyed the third cultist, who lay unconscious by the wall. As a paladin, she believed that vanquished foes should be spared. As an escaping prisoner, she realized he was an alarm waiting to go off and an evil foe who would have handed her to back to Xvim's people for sacrifice. She watched uneasily as Jas slit his throat, but said nothing.

Jas wiped her blade off on a cultist's leather tunic.

Holly retrieved a weapon for herself, though she had to use it in her left hand. Her right arm was already bruised and swollen around the mark left by the cultist's teeth. One tooth had broken the skin, which might have alarmed Holly, but she knew her god would preserve her from any disease the cultist carried.

After grabbing up her cloak, Jas snapped, "Let's go!"

Jas took the lead, but since she'd been unconscious when the cultists had brought her to the cell, she had to take directions from Holly. As they moved down the corridor, they

were assailed by the sickly sweet stench of decaying flesh. Holly remembered it came from a large room through which her captives had dragged her on the way to the cell. At the first intersection, Holly pointed in the direction of the awful smell.

Jas wrinkled her nose and raised her eyebrows. Then she spun about the corner, her sword at the ready. She motioned to the paladin that the way was clear and the two continued on. The passage opened out into a vast room.

Holly and Jas stood on either side of the corridor, peering into the room for any foes. Piles of bones littered the room, some with flesh still clinging to them. Not all of them were animal bones, and Holly felt her stomach churn yet again.

Someone was holding a whispered conversation in the room. Neither woman could spot the speakers, but they could hear them as they approached. With a quick beating of her wings, Jas leapt up to the stone ledge over the passageway exit. Holly was just about to bad away when she recognized Joel creeping along the wall just around the corner.

The paladin whispered the bard's name and rushed toward him. The bard smiled broadly and threw his arms about the paladin.

"I guess you don't need me to rescue you, do you?" Joel asked, noting the paladin had already managed to arm herself.

Holly pulled away from the bard, suddenly uneasy. She peered at the cloaked figure behind him and glared at her. "Who is this?" she hissed.

"Urn, this is Walinda of Bane," the bard said, grabbing at the paladin's arm before she tried anything rash. "She's helping us escape. We've made a truce—just until we get out of here."

"Joel, how could you?" the paladin growled, raising her sword before the priestess. "This woman is a monster."

"Holly, she helped me find you," the bard explained. "I promised her you would honor the truce."

Holly drew back, never taking her eyes off the priestess.

"We have found your friend. Now we must hurry if we are to escape before dawn," Walinda whispered. "The griffon stables are that way," she said, pointing to a staircase.

Joel started moving toward the stairs, pulling Holly with him. He turned to watch Walinda's progress behind them.

"Joel, listen," the paladin hissed, jerking away from the bard. "There is another—"

Joel never heard the rest of Holly's words. He watched in horror as a harpy with a drawn sword came swooping down on the party.

The bard threw himself at Walinda, knocking her to the ground before she was skewered by their attacker.

Joel scrambled back to his feet and drew his sword. In the large, high-ceilinged room, the harpy had just enough space to swoop around in a circle and make a second attack run on them. Joel raised his weapon, but then he recognized the attacker. It was the winged woman Walinda had offered to the Banites.

Behind him, he could hear Walinda muttering a spell. Confused and uncertain, Joel nonetheless kept his vow and stood guard over the priestess. Blue lines of power streaked from Walinda's palms and arced about the winged woman's sword.

The winged woman cried out in rage and dropped her weapon. The blade made an alarming ringing sound on the stone floor. Joel lowered his own weapon, but the winged woman kept on coming, swooping past the bard and landing on the priestess. In an instant, she had wrapped her hands about Walinda's small throat.

With one hand, Walinda grabbed at her attacker's thumbs while the other hand clawed at her face, drawing blood.

Joel was about to put a sword to the winged woman's throat when Holly slammed into him. "No! Jas is an ally!" the

paladin declared. Joel looked down at the two women brawling on the floor. Now he realized that it must have been Holly who had repaired the damage done to the winged woman. They needed to reach a compromise quickly.

"Then help me pull her off Walinda, and I'll keep Walinda away," he said.

Together the paladin and the bard managed to pull Jas from the priestess's throat. Joel shoved himself between the two, holding back Walinda, trusting Holly to keep the winged woman from attacking him.

"I take it you two have met," the bard said. He kept his voice calm, despite his worry that the noise of the battle might have awakened other cultists, or worse, alerted the eye tyrant.

"Murderess!" Jas hissed once Holly had helped her to her feet.

"Ah, Pigeon Girl," Walinda taunted. She stood up and rubbed the bruises about her throat. To Joel, she said, "Is this the measure of your protection, Poppin?"

"Enough," Joel snapped. "I made a pact with Walinda," he explained to the winged woman.

"You're a fool to trust her!" Jas growled. "You should kill her before she betrays us to the cultists."

"She won't do that," Joel argued. "She was a prisoner, too. She helped me find Holly." "How?" Holly asked suspiciously.

"I used a spell to detect goodness," Walinda replied, addressing only Holly, ignoring Jas completely. "In this place, your quaint purity stands out like an ogre at a halfling picnic."

"It's some trick," Holly insisted. "Bane is dead. She can't call on him for spells."

"For my part," Walinda said, now speaking only to Joel, "I am prepared to include this winged deformity in our bargain, if only for expediency's sake, even though I know I cannot trust her with my life."

"You have no one but yourself to blame," Holly retorted angrily. "You murdered her friends."

"Cut it out!" Joel cried, and his voice echoed through the large room, startling all three women. "If you all don't stop arguing, I'll just go back to my cell, where at least there was some peace and quiet." Joel couldn't tell which made him more nervous, the glare of hatred Jas gave him or the mocking, chastened bow of Walinda's head. "We are all going the same way," he said. "We need to stick together for safety."

Holly sighed and nodded. "You're right," she said. "Let's go."

Walinda began climbing the stairs and the bard followed.

"You will have your chance to bring her to justice as soon as we escape," Holly whispered to Jas.

Jas breathed out heavily, as if venting her fury and frustration. She gave the paladin a curt nod and motioned for her to go next. The winged woman took up the rear guard, her fists still clenched in rage.

The landing at the top of the stairs led to three other sets of stairs. An especially steep set led down into the darkness. A breeze wafted upward, laden with the odor of a menagerie.

"The griffons are stabled below," Walinda explained.

"Yes, I've got my bearings now," Joel replied.

"I can't believe they haven't posted any guards," Holly muttered.

"They feel too secure in the unassailability of their flying fortress with their Zhentarim allies below," Walinda noted. She pulled out her magical light gem and started down the steps. Joel pulled out his own magically lit stone and followed, careful to keep himself between the priestess and Jas. A push down these steps could result in more than a serious injury.

In the stable below, four griffons lay sleeping with their heads tucked beneath their wings. Each one was shackled

by a chain running from a ring in the floor to a heavy iron band about one of its front legs.

Joel tiptoed past the beasts over to the hole in the floor that the griffon riders used as a doorway to the Temple in the Sky. He peered down. A few torches twinkled on the roof of the Flaming Tower, but it took his eyes some time to adjust to the rest of the dark landscape below. Far to the south, a dark ribbon glittered in the moonlight.

"That should be the River Tesh," Holly said, pointing out the body of water to Jas. "We'll want to head upstream, toward Daggerdale," she explained.

An awful squawk rose from behind them, and they whirled around. Walinda had approached the griffons and awakened them. She held a bucket of chopped meat in her hands, but the creatures were too alarmed by her strangeness to accept food from her. They snapped at the priestess's face with their beaks. Walinda backed away hurriedly. Were it not for the chains on their legs, the griffons might have torn her apart in moments.

The creatures' shrieks and cries echoed through the chamber, and no doubt rose up the staircase. Walinda held up an iron symbol of Bane's hand and intoned some unknown words, but the griffons' clamoring only increased. The priestess looked annoyed, but she continued chanting her spell just out of reach of the creatures' beaks.

Holly rushed to Walinda's side and yanked her away from the griffons. "Stop it," she ordered. "You're going to bring the whole house down on us!"

Walinda spun angrily on the paladin. "We need to subdue these creatures to escape," she retorted.

"No we don't," Holly argued. "Jas can carry us one at a time."

"She would drop me the first chance she had," Walinda said, tossing the bucket of meat at the griffons.

"Like that," Jas agreed, snapping her fingers.

Joel approached the winged beasts, singing the calming spell that had worked so well on Butternut, but to no avail. The griffons were immune to any magic that affected ordinary beasts. They continued shrieking. Joel stepped back. "We've got to get out of here fast," he murmured, "before they send someone to check on the griffons."

Walinda tugged at his sleeve. "I cannot trust Pigeon Girl with my life. You vowed to help me escape from here," she reminded him.

"Poor Banebitch," Jas taunted. "She can't get down from this rock."

"You don't get down from a rock, you get down from a goose," Joel retorted automatically. Then he remembered his vision and the wings he'd found. He drew the golden talisman out of his tunic pocket and held it up for the others to see.

"Ahh ... a feather token," Jas said. "Haven't seen one of those in a while."

"What does it do?" Holly asked.

"You throw it to the ground," Jas explained, "and you grow wings. You can use it only once."

"I can carry you," Joel said to Walinda, "and Jas can carry Holly."

From somewhere above them came human shouts.

"To the hole! Hurry!" Jas shouted, grabbing Holly's arm and pulling her in that direction.

Joel followed, with Walinda right behind. At the edge of the hole, he hesitated. "I just throw it to the ground?"

"The floor will do," Jas explained. "It would take a little too long to get to the ground."

Joel threw the talisman to the floor. The wings shattered with a tiny flash. Then a golden light blossomed from the broken magic item, bathing Joel's body in a rich radiance. When the glow had faded, Joel had a pair of great butterfly wings jutting from his back. They were yellow, with black striations, fully three times the size of Jas's.

"There's something else I should explain about these magical wings," Jas said as she shouldered Walinda aside to stand before Joel.

"What?" the bard asked.

Jas put her hands on the bard's chest. "You can use them to glide downward, but you can't fly back up with them. Once you start down, there's no coming back," she said, and then she gave Joel a hard shove backward.

The bard fell through the hole and plummeted downward into the dark sky.

Joel started to scream, but the wings spread out from his body, controlled by some subconscious instinct. The magical appendages checked the speed of his descent, and he began drifting like a dandelion seed. After taking a deep breath and letting his air out, he regained his self-control.

The bard discovered that, by twitching his shoulders, he could control his direction, but just as Jas had said, he could not regain lost altitude. The winged woman had prevented him from honoring his vow to help the priestess of Bane escape.

He craned his neck to see the hole in the floor of the Temple in the Sky. By the feeble light of the waning moon, he soon saw what he'd expected to see—Jas soaring away from the flying rock, carrying Holly. There was no sign of Walinda.

Joel wondered if the giants on the tower would spot them, and if the cultists would mount the griffons and pursue the prisoners. He also began to worry that he might just end up landing on top of the tower, or so near it that he would be quickly recaptured.

Able to control her flight, Jas soon caught up to the bard. Holly's arms and legs were wrapped around the winged woman's neck and waist. Jas wasn't able to hover beside Joel, but she flew under him and then up, trailing her legs.

"Grab hold," Holly shouted.

Joel reached out and snagged the strap of one of Jas's boots. He felt his stomach lurch backward, but his wings held and the rest of his body remained intact. Jas pulled him along as easily as a child played a kite on a string. The winged woman headed southwestward along the edge of the Border Forest, keeping the River Tesh to her left as Holly had instructed.

Joel looked back, scanning the sky for pursuit from the Temple in the Sky. He thought he saw dark specks issuing from beneath the great flying rock, but in the blackness, it was hard to be sure. Then the bard spotted something much larger, something he recognized without any trouble.

It was Walinda's floating ship, the one in which she'd traveled to the tower. Now, however, the ship was flying, moving upward toward the Temple in the Sky. Just as it drew near the base of the flying rock, Jas flew into a low bank of clouds, obscuring the bard's view.

Joel puzzled over what he had just witnessed. Had Walinda summoned the vessel somehow? But if she could do that, then why make a pact with him, and why had she seemed willing to risk flying on the griffons?

Unless she hadn't realized the ship would come for her. Was it possible, Joel wondered, that Bane had found another way to rescue her?

Seven Hunted

Joel had no notion how far they traveled, but by the time Jas began to descend, the sky was beginning to lighten. Below them was a meadow adjacent to the Border Forest. Upon Jas's instructions, Joel released his hold on the winged woman's bootstrap when they were still a good twenty feet above the ground. Jas landed, dropped Holly, and sank to the ground. Between carrying Holly's weight and towing me,

she has to be exhausted, the bard realized. He was worn out merely from hanging on and being buffeted by the wind.

He drifted downward. The instant his feet touched the earth, the magical wings on his back dissolved, leaving only aching shoulder muscles as a reminder of their previous existence. From here on, he and Holly would have to walk. What Jas would do was up to her.

The bard strode up to the winged woman. "Look," he said, looming over her, "I'm grateful for the help you've given us, but you shouldn't have done that."

"Done what?" Jas asked, not even looking up at him. "Pushed me out of the Temple in the Sky," Joel retorted

Jas looked up at the bard as if he were a fool. She yawned.

"Well?" Joel prompted, expecting a reply.

"If you're expecting an apology," Jas said with a laugh, "you're going to be disappointed."

"You abandoned Walinda," Joel growled. "You left her there to die."

"What makes you think I didn't run her through before I left?" Jas asked.

Joel's eyes widened in shock.

"We didn't harm her, Joel," Holly reassured the bard. "We just shoved her aside and flew off without her."

"And somehow that's supposed to be better?" Joel argued.

"Depends how much the cultists make her suffer," Jas said with a smirk. "A quick death would be too good for her."

"We had a pact," Joel snapped angrily.

Jas rose to her feet and stood no more than a foot from the bard. She was no taller than Walinda, but her body was tough and muscular. She'd seen some hard times—there were scars on her shoulders, her throat, her jaw. She was Joel's senior by a few years, at least, and the annoyance on her face made her appear even older.

Everything about her—her strength, her toughness, her age—intimidated Joel. He thought of the priestess of Bane, who appeared so young and delicate and vulnerable, although he knew she was none of those things. "I promised Walinda my protection," he added.

"I don't give a damn what you promised," Jas replied slowly and coolly. "She tortured and murdered the members of my crew one by one. She made me watch. There was nothing I could do or say to stop her. Then she began torturing me. If she thought it would please her god, she'd do the same to you. Your paladin friend saved my life. I owed her a rescue, and I pay my debts. If not for that, I might have stayed behind and risked being recaptured just for the chance to finish off your precious Walinda." Joel hesitated, considering Jas's words.

"Look, kid," the winged woman added, "it was a stupid promise. You're lucky I made it impossible for you to keep it. You're welcome."

Joel bristled at the woman's patronizing tone. "She helped me find a way out of there, helped me find Holly," he said. "I owed her a debt, too."

"We would have found you without her," Jas argued,

"A promise is a promise," Joel insisted. He looked over at the paladin, who had remained silent the whole time. "Holly, surely you see my point. You're a paladin. Your word is your honor."

Holly spoke softly. "I went along with you, but I did not give my word as you did. I could not. She was a priestess of Bane, Joel, a sworn enemy to my lord, Lathander. Besides, you could have been enchanted. I think you must have been. I can see no reason otherwise for you to make so foolish a vow. And a vow that is made under the duress of magic is not valid."

Joel remembered the urge he'd felt to accept Walinda's first offer. He was certain he had overcome whatever power the priestess had used. "I was not enchanted!" he insisted.

"Maybe not magically," Jas said with a smirk. "You could have been seduced in the usual way. The bitch Las more than her share of curves under that armor, even if she's rotten at the core. I saw her bat her eyes at you and cling to your sleeve, Poppin."

"You're mad," Joel said.

"No. Just realistic," Jas retorted.

"I made a vow in the name of my god to aid her until we escaped," Joel said.

Jas huffed with exasperation. "Fine," she cried, and she pointed back toward the northeast. "Go back and rescue her. I won't stop you. The cultists have probably already chopped her up for dinner, but maybe you'll get lucky and find a piece or two."

Joel blanched with anger. Then he remembered the flying ship. He sighed. He was wasting his time arguing about his honor. Neither Jas nor Holly would concede. Still, for the insult Jas had given him, the bard couldn't resist the temptation to tell the winged woman what he'd seen. At the very least, it would wipe the smug look off her face.

"That won't be necessary," he explained. "I saw her flying ship approaching the Temple in the Sky. Whoever summoned it up there has probably already rescued her."

It was Jasmine's turn to go pale. "Bloody hell," she whispered, "Now I may never get it back."

"Get what back?" Joel demanded.

"The flying ship," Holly explained. "It was Jas's. It can fly—urn—all sorts of places."

"Whoever or whatever is at the helm is learning how to use it faster than I thought," Jas said. "If they figure out how to go beyond the sphere, I'll be stranded here, and they'll have the run of space."

"Well, there's not much you can do about it now," Joel said. He tried unsuccessfully to stifle a yawn. "We should all get some rest for a few hours before we press on."

Jas yawned, too. "That's the first sensible thing you've said since we've met," the winged woman noted. Wrapping her tattered cloak around herself, she lay down on the ground.

Joel looked over at Holly.

"You rest first," the paladin said. "I'll keep watch."

The bard's chivalry collapsed beneath the weight of his fatigue. He nodded in agreement. He unloaded all the weaponry he'd taken from the cultists' armory before he lay down. He fell asleep without another thought.

The sun had risen and climbed a good two hours into the sky when Holly woke Joel to take watch. Jas was still sleeping. The paladin had shot a couple of rabbits with the crossbow and skinned and cleaned them with Joel's dagger. She left them by a tiny fire for Joel to cook.

While he worked, the bard's mind reviewed all that had happened the night before, pondering if there was anything he should have done or could have done differently. By the time the rabbits were finished roasting, Jas woke up. The two shared the first rabbit in an uncomfortable silence.

Finally Joel said, "I'm sorry for the loss of your crew. I understand how you feel about Walinda."

Jas nodded an acceptance of his condolence. "You didn't know her like I did," she said.

"Well, I knew enough," Joel admitted. "But I wasn't charmed, like you thought—magically or otherwise. There was something else that made me trust her. She risked everything to do her god's bidding. She was completely faithful to him. When she swore an oath in his name, I knew she would keep her word. And she did. She helped me find Holly, and she didn't betray us."

"She got herself caught. She didn't deserve your help," Jas countered. "She would never have made a deal with you if she didn't think she had more to gain from it than you did. That's how priests of Bane think Everything is a power play to them. Especially the faithful ones. People don't call them

evil because they wear black. It's because they hurt people and think it's all right because they do it in their god's name."

"Suppose Bane really did tell her to do those things. What choice would she have?"

"She could find herself a new god," Jas said, his voice rising in exasperation.

"Would you do that? Leave your deity?" Joel asked.

"I have as little to do with any deity as possible," Jas declared. "In my experience, gods are nothing but trouble, and believe me, I've had some experience in that line. Don't get me wrong. I respect them. All of them. But I try to avoid getting anywhere near their business. I'd advise you to do the same, but since you're already a priest, I realize it's too late."

Joel grinned. "You're not the first to give me that advice," he replied. "But like you said, it's already too late. What are you going to do now?"

"Well, I need to warn someone about my ship being captured by Bane's folk. Someone nearby and powerful, who can shoot it out of the sky if he can't help me get it back. Elminster used to live near here. Is he still around?"

Joel nodded.

"I thought I'd accompany Holly safely back to her home in Daggerdale first. If I recall my geography correctly, it's on the way."

"If you're using the road," Joel said. "As the crow flies, you're better off flying due south. I can see Holly back to Daggerdale if you're in a hurry."

"Actually, I don't usually fly overland very far. For one thing, it's exhausting. For another, I like to stick to the beaten track. I'm too much of a city rat to survive in the wilderness."

"Me, too," Joel said.

"You, too, what?" Holly asked from behind them. The paladin had awakened and joined them beside the fire. She

still looked tired, but the cheerful smile had returned to her face.

"Jas and I were discussing how we were going to see you safely back home," Joel explained. "But we need you to hunt rabbits and start fires for us."

"City folk," Holly teased.

"Just get us to Dagger Falls, and we'll be in our element," Joel said.

Holly shook her head. "The Zhents have a puppet constable in Dagger Falls . . . Guthbert Golthammer," the paladin explained. "He's an idiot, but his second-in-command, a half-orc called Toren, knows his job. When you were unconscious, we passed through with the Xvim priest. We'll be recognized as escaped prisoners. And Jas would be sure to attract attention. With those wings, she'd be dragged in on suspicion of spying."

"So what do you recommend, O most wise native guide?" Joel asked.

"We skirt around the town," Holly suggested, picking up a piece of roasted rabbit. "This far north, the farmers will be too afraid of Zhent reprisals to give us much aid, but they won't turn us in. I can at least convince them to part with some waterskins and food. Jas can help us cross the River Tesh. Then we head for the foothills of the Desertsouth Mountains. The Zhents don't patrol that far west. Then we head south until Joel finds his trail to the Lost Vale. After that, Jas and I continue on to Anathar's Dell."

"Sounds like a plan," Joel said.

Holly finished the remaining rabbit while Jas took to the air to scout out the lay of the land. When she returned, she reported they were still northeast of Dagger Falls. They needed to continue due west for several miles before they could cross the river out of sight of the town. They drank their fill from a stream before they began their trek in earnest.

The day was fair and warm, and the terrain was not difficult. About noon, Holly risked knocking on a farmhouse door. As she'd predicted, the farmer's wife looked frightened and didn't offer any hospitality, but she did send her away with two waterskins full of milk and a big loaf of bread—things she could claim had been stolen.

The three adventurers hurried away to put some distance between them and their benefactor. In the shade of some woods, they feasted on the handouts and rested about an hour. Then they headed southwest toward the river. They reached the water by nightfall and camped. Holly caught some fish for dinner.

Jas took first watch and woke Joel after midnight. Other than a raccoon family raiding their camp for the discarded fish heads left from their meal, Joel's watch was quiet. Holly, on the last watch, woke the other two before the birds began to twitter. "There's something out there," the paladin said. "Something is howling. It's been getting closer."

Joel and Jas listened for a while. The howl came from the northeast. "Just a wolf," Joel suggested.

Holly shook her head. "Wolves travel in packs. When one howls, the others answer. This is something traveling alone."

"A werewolf?" Jas asked.

Joel held up his finger and listened to the howl again. Holly was wrong. There was an answer, a much more disturbing noise. The bard could just barely hear it.

"There's a horn. A hunting horn," the bard told them. "Coming from behind us."

"What could anyone be hunting at this hour?" Jas asked.

"Us," Holly whispered.

"Don't they have better things to do with their time?" the winged woman groaned.

"We need to throw their hound off the scent," Joel said.

"So we cross the river," Jas said.

"Not just yet," Holly answered. "We need to lay a false trail."

They gathered up their weaponry and the waterskins and proceeded west down the river path. With only a tiny sliver of light from the setting moon to show the way, it was slow going. They splashed through two creeks that emptied into the river. At the third creek, Jas picked up Holly and flew across the river.

While Joel waited for the winged woman to return, he planned the magic he might need for the day and prayed to Finder to grant him the spells. The howling grew so close that the bard became edgy and impatient. The birds had begun chirping, and the sky was beginning to lighten. Joel was just considering trying to swim the river when Jas finally returned.

"What kept you?" he demanded.

"Holly insisted I land far past the riverbank so they won't be able to pick up our scent by following the water's edge," Jas explained. "Let's go."

Joel wrapped his arms around Jas's neck as Holly had. It felt awkward to have a strange woman wrapping her arms about his chest. Jas didn't seem to be bothered by it. Joel was reminded of Walinda wrapping her cloak around him to hide from the beholder, but while the priestess had smelled of roses, Jas smelled of leather and sweat. Then they took off, and Joel could think only of returning to earth. Without wings of his own, Joel was terrified by the sensation of nothing beneath his feet.

Jas landed in a meadow beyond an untended apple orchard. Holly was digging in the dirt with a sword around a scraggly plant with white flowers.

"Are we going to hide in a tunnel?" Jas teased.

Holly held up a small red potato. Joel and Jas joined the paladin on their knees. When they'd amassed several handfuls of the vegetable, they continued on their trek, following a deer trail.

Shortly after dawn, duly warned by Holly to stay out of range of any spellcasting, Jas took to the sky to check out

their pursuers. The paladin and the bard kept moving.

By the time the sun had climbed over the Dagger Hills, coloring the Desertsouth Mountains a brilliant red, Jas returned.

"Well, there's good news and bad news," the winged woman reported. "There's about a dozen of them on horseback. Didn't spot any griffons, though. I'm pretty sure one of the riders is a priest and one's a mage. They seemed to have figured out we crossed the river. They've turned back downstream."

Holly nodded. "The river is way too deep and fast for horses to swim. The only ford is below Dagger Falls."

"What's the bad news?" Joel asked.

"The hound we heard. It's like nothing I've ever seen," Jas said. "It walks on its hind legs like a man, and it's as hairy as a werewolf and as black as soot. It's also huge... bigger than a man. The river didn't scare it. It jumped right in and started swimming across. The current carried it quite a ways downstream, but it came out on the opposite bank. That's when I turned around and came back."

"We better keep moving," Joel said.

They made for the mountains, and the peaks seemed to grow reassuringly closer. They hadn't heard the Zhent beast's howl since they'd crossed the river, but the creature was on all their minds. Joel kept estimating in his head how long it would take for something to sniff them out, but the farther they traveled, the less worried he became.

Holly traveled with the crossbow loaded, keeping an eye out for game. For lunch, they had two more rabbits with their potatoes. Since their fire couldn't be the only one in the dale, they didn't worry too much about anyone spotting the smoke. They rested for an hour in the shade of a line of trees bordering a stream. Joel had nearly dozed off when he thought he heard a voice say, "Listen."

The bard jerked awake. A howl reached his ear. He called out to Jas and Holly. The howl came again. Without any

discussion, the three gathered their meager belongings and moved on.

In the late afternoon, they nearly stumbled upon a skunk chomping on the rancid corpse of a deer. Holly and Jas pulled back, but Joel stood watching the creature for a moment, then began singing softly.

"What is he doing?" Jas whispered to Holly, gesturing at the young priest.

Holly shrugged and didn't reply, afraid that any noise might alarm the animal. She wondered if perhaps Joel, a city boy, might not know what it was he faced.

Joel finished his song. The skunk looked up at him expectantly. Joel began another song. Then he addressed the skunk in its own animal tongue.

When Jedidiah had taught the bard to charm and speak to animals, they had practiced on a cat. "You should charm the animal first before speaking with it," Jedidiah had explained, "because charming it gets the animal's attention. Especially cats. They're notoriously bad listeners." With a skunk, Joel figured, charm was essential, since it kept the animal calm. The conversation with the skunk was similar to the one Joel had with the cat. Simple. Very simple.

"This is my food," the skunk said.

"It's your food," Joel agreed.

"Do you want some?" the skunk asked. It was, after all, enchanted by the bard.

"No thank you," Joel replied. "I'm just passing through."

"Too bad. There's plenty of food here."

"Unless some bad creature comes and takes it away," Joel agreed.

"What bad creature?" the skunk asked. "Some big, hairy howling thing following me and my mates," Joel explained. "Maybe after we pass, you should spray our trail. That will keep him away. Then he won't steal your food."

"Good idea," the skunk said.

"I'm leaving now, with my mates. There is no need to be alarmed when we pass," Joel said.

"Bye," the skunk said, and returned to chewing on the deer carcass.

Joel motioned for Jas and Holly to keep behind him as he passed the skunk. Both women crept past, holding their breath, keeping Joel between them and the skunk.

"Don't forget to spray our trail," Joel called.

"I won't," the skunk answered.

When they'd put several hundred yards between them and the skunk, Jas burst out, "What were you doing?"

"You spoke with it, didn't you?" Holly guessed. Joel nodded. "You can never have too many friends in low places," he replied with a grin.

"Why did you speak to it?" Jas demanded. "It's a skunk, for gods' sake."

"I had to warn it about the big, hairy howling thing," Joel explained. "It's going to spray the trail behind us."

Holly laughed aloud. Even Jas grinned.

The creature howled again, and their smiles faded. The adventurers continued on. They turned and twisted down several different animal paths and trudged along some streambeds, yet the howling didn't seem to fade in the distance. After another hour of hiking with tired feet and the sound of the beast behind them, their nerves were beginning to fray.

"Shut up already," Jas growled back down the trail, as if the beast might hear her.

"I wonder why it hasn't caught up with us yet," Joel muttered.

"If it's really some sort of hunting hound," Holly said, "it knows better. Its job is to harry us until its master gets here."

"But the riders had to detour to cross the river," Joel remembered. "So it's deliberately hanging back."

Time to go on the offensive," Jas declared.

"I think so," Holly agreed.

Jas did a quick air foray to locate the beast. She returned in a very short while.

"It's rolling in the grass about a mile back, as if it were trying to rub something off," the winged woman reported. "I think your little black and white friend got it but good."

"But not enough to put it off our scent," Holly noted. "How interesting."

Quickly they planned their attack. Jas flew off with Holly, and Joel hurried back down the trail at a loping gait toward the beast. When he'd reached the hedgerow bordering the field where Jas had said he'd find the beast, he stopped and ducked down.

Taking a deep breath, he began to sing Cassana's lament from the opera *Wizards in Love*. He sang the sorceress's part in falsetto, then shifted to the tenor range to sing the part of the whiny lich Zrie Prakis. As the bard went into the song's finale, he knew the beast had taken the bait. He could smell the creature's approach. Jas had guessed correctly. The skunk had gotten him.

The smell made breathing difficult, but Joel kept singing, as if he were oblivious to the beast creeping up on him. The bard fervently hoped Jas's timing would not be off.

Something on the other side of the hedgerow growled.

Joel sprang to his feet and spun around with his sword raised.

A great black beast sprang over the hedgerow, lunging for the bard's throat. In that moment, Jas, still holding Holly, dropped on the creature, delivering it a resounding kick in the head with plenty of weight behind it. The beast shook its head as if stunned, but it didn't fall. The winged woman and the paladin separated the moment they came to the ground. Holly rolled to her feet in an instant and launched a crossbow bolt into the beast's chest.

The creature turned to face the paladin. Holly gasped. Jas slashed at the beast's arm and managed to draw blood. Joel

finished intoning his spell song and pointed at the creature. The hedgerow behind the beast grew and began to snake outward. In five heartbeats, it had entangled the beast's feet, legs, waist, and finally its hairy chest and arms. It was an exceptionally thick hedgerow, and the beast's furious struggles were in vain.

"Bear?" Holly whispered.

"No, it's not a bear," Jas said. "It looks almost human, except for that snout... a really hairy human. It's got fingers but no tail. Maybe it's some sort of half-ogre."

Joel drew closer, despite the stench of skunk that covered the creature. "Bear!" the bard gasped, just barely able to recognize the huge man's features, despite the distortion of his face into a wolflike snout.

"Why is it wearing a steel eye patch?" Jas asked.

"Because it was once a man with one eye," Holly said. "It is you, isn't it, Bear?" the paladin asked.

The creature snarled at the paladin. Then, in a gravelly voice, its mouth twisting horribly, it replied, "You will... die, paladin. This is all your . . . f-fault, bitch." The words came out slowly and not very clearly, as if Bear was having trouble pronouncing them.

"What?" Holly asked, confused by the accusation. "How did you get this way, Bear?"

"I offered you and the . . . priest of Finder ... to Iyachtu Xvim. If you are not both sacri-f-f—sacrificed with the new moon, my life is ... forfeit," the beast-man said. "The priest I serve gave me the power to track you down so that I might live."

"Can they change you back?" Holly asked.

"Who cares?" Jas asked. "Just slay him and let's get going."

"The spell that transformed me took away the light of my humanity . . . f-forever," Bear growled. "I am all darkness now. Pure. F-F-Favored of Iyachtu Xvim."

"You see now why I avoid gods," Jas muttered to Joel.

Bear's one good eye gleamed with madness. "You will all... die in pain and humiliation. I can taste your souls and ... feel your power wherever your f-feet have touched the earth," the enchanted man boasted. "I might have lost your trail when you flew across the river... but for the power of the fourth one. I can sense the fourth one ... from miles away."

"The fourth one?" Jas asked. "Who's he talking about?"

Holly's eyes scanned the meadow carefully.

"Do you mean Walinda of Bane?" Joel asked, wondering if the priestess were following them to exact some sort of revenge.

Bear gave a braying laugh. "No. The fourth one who travels beside you ... is more powerful than any godless priestess. The fourth one's power ... is far greater even than our high priest, the Ruinlord. When I bring the fourth one to sacrifice . . . my god will elevate me above even the Ruinlord."

Jas shifted nervously. "He's crazy. There is no fourth one," she declared. "Is there?"

Bear writhed in the enchanted hedgerow, struggling to free himself. When he found he could not, he gave an ear-piercing howl.

"Stop that!" Jas ordered, leveling the point of her sword at Bear's throat.

From far off came the sound of a hunting horn.

Bear howled again, louder and longer.

"Shut up!" Jas shouted.

Bear's howls became frantic.

Jas shoved her sword into the beast-man's neck and sliced his windpipe. The howling stopped. Bear's shoulders slumped forward. Only the hedgerow held him up.

Joel looked at Jas, horrified at how quickly she had taken the beast-man's life.

"You didn't have to do that!" Holly objected, whirling angrily on the winged woman.

"Don't be a fool," Jas snapped. "His only reason for being was to bring us to our death. Now we can all sleep at night."

The hunting horn sounded again.

"Come on, Holly," Joel said softly, laying his hand on the paladin's back. "We have to get going."

"Damned right," Jas said. She strode off back down the path they'd come.

Joel and Holly followed behind her.

"Joel, suppose Bear wasn't crazy? Suppose there is a fourth one? Who could it be?" the girl asked.

"Holly, I haven't a clue," the bard admitted. "Let's keep moving."

By nightfall, they'd reached the foothills of the Desertsouth Mountains. They were considering where they should make camp for the night when they spotted something glowing softly somewhere to the south. The light was an unnatural violet color.

"It's Giant's Claw," Holly said excitedly.

"Is that good or bad?" Jas asked.

"It's a rock," the paladin explained, "with faerie fire cast on it. It marks the entrance to a valley. Giants used to live there, waylaying caravans, until Lord Randal drove them out. It's supposed to be a lovely valley, teeming with game."

"Sounds like a good place to find breakfast," Joel said.

They made their way deeper into the foothills until they'd reached the magical stone. It was a great hexagonal pillar of ebony basalt, as tall as a giant, polished to a smooth finish.

Holly put her back against the west side of the rock and slid down to the ground with a blissful smile. "This is where I'm sleeping," she said.

Jas eyed the stone warily. She settled down a few yards away.

Joel took first watch. He sat with his back against the east side of the stone and watched the waning moon rise in the east. It was like a dying ember, and Selune's Tears, the tiny lights that trailed after it, were like sparks. Tomorrow, or

perhaps the next night, would mark the new moon, when the Xvimists would have sacrificed Holly, Jas, and him. He wondered if Bear's death would be enough to placate the bloodthirsty god of the priest of Xvim and his Zhent followers, and if they would abandon the hunt now. Joel doubted it, but with their hound dead, the Xvimists and Zhents could be outwitted. At least Joel hoped so.

The bard's thoughts returned uneasily to Bear's claim that he sensed a fourth person traveling with them. Joel puzzled over who it could be. Someone with power. Absolutely no one came to mind. Joel shook his head. Perhaps Jas was right. Bear had been maddened by his transformation and sensed someone who wasn't there.

After turning the watch over to Jas, Joel slept soundly. Holly woke him in the morning by pressing a raspberry to his lips. She and Jas had found a berry patch. The berries were big, sweet, juicy, and full of flavor. In no time at all, the three of them were covered with briar scratches, their fingers and lips stained purple.

"That's what the stone marker means," Holly joked "Purple berries here."

"It must mark something," Joel said. "It's not like any other rock near here, and its magic is permanent. We could go exploring," he suggested.

"It's not on our agenda," Jas said tersely. "You're supposed to be making a pilgrimage to the Lost Vale, aren't you?"

"We have to hunt anyway," Joel pointed out. "It might as well be here."

"I suppose a tiny side trip couldn't hurt," Jas said with a sigh.

They looked down into the valley. Even by the light of day, it had an eerie look to it. Deposits of loose shale covered much of the mountain slopes on either side. Scrub pines grew out of the shale, but many of them were naked of needles and covered with morning glory vines. Where the

shale didn't cover the slopes, wildflowers bloomed, carpeting the hills with gold.

They made their way downward, walking among the flowers, sliding on the shale. Birds chirped everywhere, and Holly spotted deer droppings. Jas took to the air to scout for game. Joel followed the paladin as she crept along the valley floor, alert for every sound. A mile into the valley, she shot two large pheasants and scavenged their nest for the eggs. She began to teach Joel how to pluck feathers. Soon the bard was covered with them and Holly was laughing at him.

Somewhere off in the distance, something howled. Quickly a horn answered.

"Beshaba's filthy luck!" Joel cursed. An icy hand seemed to grip his heart.

"Where's Jas?" Holly asked with alarm.

Joel looked up at the sky. The winged woman was making her way toward them at top speed. She landed just in front of them, her face pale with anger. "Did you hear that?" she demanded.

Joel nodded.

"They're at the stone," the winged woman reported. "You're trapped in this valley."

"What's at the other end of the valley?" Joel asked.

That," Jas said, pointing to a high-peaked mountain. "Its lower slopes are either cliff faces or covered with loose shale."

"They won't be able to charge their horses up the shale slope," Joel noted.

Jas nodded. "There's a ledge on the upper slope, blocked by a rock with a narrow opening, like a needle," she said. "Unless they can fly, too, they can only come at you one at a time through the rock."

"Get Holly up there first," Joel ordered. "I'll see if I can find a way to hold them off."

"I'll be back," Jas promised as she took off with the paladin.

Joel considered carefully what spells he should call on Finder for. When he was finished praying, he dragged a deadfall branch along the valley floor until it lay between two boulders. Unless they were prepared to go up a steep shale slope, the Xvimists would have to ride their horses between the boulders over the branch. Quietly Joel began singing a spell over the branch. Jas arrived before he finished. She paced impatiently until he finished.

"Trip spell?" she asked, pointing to the branch.

Joel nodded as he wrapped his arms around her neck.

Jas took off, flying low, until she reached the end of the valley. She struggled to gain altitude until a thermal of air caught her and practically dumped her and her passenger on the mountain slope.

The needle was an excellent defensive position. It was a thin cleft in a wall of rock situated on a smaller peak just in front of the major peak. Except for a stretch of steeply sloped shale, the other sides of the lesser peak were cliffs. The base of the major peak and the saddle that led to it were all cliff faces. The valley below was a gorge, and the only way up out of the gorge was through the needle on the minor peak.

Holly stood just behind the rock needle, her crossbow loaded, her sword drawn.

Joel looked at the ground just behind the needle. It was worn smooth and flat, like a trail cut into the rock. It went down along the saddle to the major peak before it disappeared beneath another shale slide.

"This led somewhere once," Holly said. "Did you see any sign of a cave from the air? My people used to use them as crypts."

Jas shook her head. She began gathering up large rocks in her cloak. "You don't have to stay, you know," Joel pointed out.

Jas stood up and looked at Joel. "Like that old joke about two guys running from a bear."

Joel grinned.

"What joke?" Holly asked.

"Two guys are running from a bear," Joel explained. "One says to the other, 'We'll never outrun this bear.' The other guy says, 'I don't have to outrun the bear'—"

" 'I only have to outrun you,' " Jas finished.

"That's terrible," Holly said.

"That's life," Jas said. She looked at Joel with a grim expression. "I'll stay until I have no reason to stay," she said.

Joel nodded. She expected to be the last standing, or flying. When he and Holly had fallen, she would be free to fly away.

It seemed to take forever for the Xvimists to reach the base of the mountain. Joel squinted into the sun. Leading the hunt was the loping figure of a man-beast. If it wasn't Bear, it was his twin brother.

"How did he survive?" Holly wondered aloud.

"Maybe he wasn't quite dead and the priest of Xvim healed him when they found him," Joel suggested. "Or maybe there was some sort of regeneration spell woven into his transformation,"

"I've got to remember to start cremating the things I kill," Jas muttered.

Below them, Bear howled, even though his master, the priest of Xvim, rode right behind him.

"He's doing that just to annoy me," Jas snarled.

They counted fourteen others behind Bear and the priest. One wore robes like a mage, but the rest were dressed as Zhentilar. Nine of the soldiers were on foot. The trip trap Joel had left behind must have injured their mounts.

The horses balked at the shale slope. The riders dismounted and eyed the slope warily.

Holly turned to Jas and whispered, "If you find Anathar's Dell, tell Lord Randal everything that happened. Tell him I thank him for the trust he had in me. Tell him I died fighting

the Zhentilar and the servants of Xvim in Lathander's name."

"I'll never remember all that," Jas said, giving the girl a gentle squeeze on the shoulder. "You'll have to live through this and tell him yourself."

Listening to the paladin's pious words, Joel thought again of his own god. Nothing personal, Joel thought, but I'm not really fighting this one for you. He intended to sing a blessing for strength just before the soldiers reached the needle, but in the interim, he wondered if there was anything else he should try praying for. Finder had helped him escape once, but there really wasn't a lot of time for a fresh vision of Jedidiah. He could pray for a quick death so Bear didn't have the opportunity to gloat over Joel's torture. He could pray for courage. His stomach was feeling queasy, and the sword in his hand felt heavy and strange. Mostly he felt regret that he'd never become comfortable in the role of a priest, never lived up to what he thought Jedidiah or Finder needed from him. "Sorry if I was a disappointment, Finder," he whispered.

It wasn't a battle cry, but the words left his spirit feeling a little lighter.

The priest of Xvim finally goaded the soldiers into moving up the shale slope. For all their faintheartedness, the soldiers looked grim and strong, and their weapons sharp and deadly.

At the base of the shale, Bear howled and capered back and forth before the priest of Xvim. Joel could hear him panting. The beastlike sound made Joel's flesh crawl. Bear disgusted him. He didn't want to be near the man-beast again. Suddenly he was gripped by the desire to keep the beast away from Holly. That, at least, could be accomplished.

"Jas," he whispered, "take Holly and get away from here. If you catch one of those thermals, you should be able to get over the first line of peaks. Bear will never be able to follow you over them. He said he can only sense where your feet

have touched the earth. He can't track you as long as you're flying."

"No," Holly whispered. "I'm not leaving you."

Jas exchanged a look with Joel, but before the two adults could come to an agreement, there was a sudden flash of light to Joel's left, followed quickly by the boom of thunder. Joel looked up in the sky. There wasn't a cloud in sight. As if of one mind, the remaining horses of the foe neighed in panic and galloped off back down the valley.

From the major peak came a great roar. Joel squinted, fully expecting to see a dragon. The roar increased until it sounded like a hundred dragons. Suddenly Joel felt as if he were bouncing on a galloping horse. The very ground beneath his feet was shaking. The shale on the major peak began sliding down the cliff like a great black waterfall. The loose rock parted around the minor peak where they stood, like a stream about a rock. Then the shale continued to spill down the side of the cliff until it nearly filled the gorge below, burying the Zhentilar and the priest of Xvim and the capering Bear.

It was over in less than a minute, although it took much longer for the dust to settle. The noise had so startled all the wildlife that the valley had become deadly silent.

Then Joel heard what sounded like applause. It came from the direction of the high peak on the opposite side of the saddle. Joel peered through the settling dust. A figure stepped out from behind a boulder and began crossing the saddle toward them. It was a man with white hair and a white beard. He wasn't actually applauding, Joel realized, but clapping the dust off his black trousers and red tunic. He smiled up at Joel, and his face crinkled in wrinkles.

"I don't believe it!" Joel muttered, recognizing the man at once.

Holly and Jas half raised their weapons, but they were too astonished to actually attack. With a wave of his hand, Joel indicated that they could relax. He stepped out onto the

saddle, spat some dust from his throat, and called out, "Jedidiah! Well met!"

The elder priest of Finder raised his brass glaur over his head in a little victory salute. Jedidiah had once claimed that the valved horn had magical properties that could "bring down the house." Joel realized that he had just witnessed a demonstration of the instrument's power.

"Well met, Rebel Bard," Jedidiah answered his pupil. "You've come a long way."

Eight
Jedidiah

"I had a vision that you were in terrible danger," Jedidiah explained, "so I headed toward Daggerdale."

"But how did you find me?" Joel asked.

"A little bird told me where you were," the older priest said with a wink. Joel looked down into the valley where Holly and Jas were busy rounding up the Zhents' horses. At Joel's request, they'd left the two men alone to confer. "I don't know that I deserve all this special attention," the bard said, "but I do appreciate it," he added, turning around to thank his old mentor.

The old priest put his hand on the younger man's shoulder and gave him a reassuring squeeze. "Finder has a reason for everything," Jedidiah said, sitting down on a rock. While the last few days had worn Joel ragged, the older priest looked as rested and relaxed as he had when Joel had last seen him in Berdusk.

"Tell me about your journey so far," Jedidiah said. Joel sat beside his friend and described his trip from Berdusk. While his journey to the Dragon Coast and his travels through Cormyr had taken over a month, it was the events of the past six days that took the longest to relate. He found himself explaining in great detail his meeting with Walinda, their subsequent agreement, and Holly's and Jas's reactions

to it. "Do you think I was wrong to bargain with Walinda?" he asked finally.

Jedidiah stroked his beard thoughtfully. At last he shrugged. "Well, considering Bane died before Finder even became a god, we're not exactly sworn enemies with his priests," the older man noted. "Among the gods, Moander was Finder's only foe, and Finder slew him. This woman Jas has a point, though. As a rule, priests of Bane can't be trusted. If they offer you something, it's a sure bet they'll be getting more out of the bargain than you will. Still, it turned out all right. This Walinda didn't betray you, and you kept your vow as best as you were humanly able. You got away safely. Someone very well might have rescued her in the flying ship. No harm done."

"No harm done," Joel repeated, "but what would Finder think about my making a bargain with someone like Walinda?"

Jedidiah chuckled. "Finder made bargains with worse sorts when he was a mortal. Much worse, believe me. Oh, before I forget, I found this in a resale shop in Dagger Falls." From inside his tunic, the old man pulled out a set of birdpipes and held it out.

"My birdpipes!" Joel said excitedly, taking the instrument from the older man. He blew a tentative scale. The instrument was completely unharmed. Feeling like a complete fool, the Rebel Bard brushed a tear from his eye. "I thought for sure Bear must have smashed this to pieces after he captured me."

"Well, he may have been no music lover, but he knew its value," Jedidiah replied. "You crafted it well." From the folds of his cloak, the old priest drew out a curved blade.

"It's Holly's cutlass!" Joel said in astonishment.

"Is it?" Jedidiah asked. "The owner of the shop where I found your birdpipes said the man who sold him your birdpipes sold this weapon to him as well. I knew it wasn't

your sword, but I bought it anyway, in case it belonged to a companion of yours."

"Joel! Joel, look up there!" Holly shouted from below. She was climbing up from the valley floor in such an excited state that she was having trouble keeping her footing on the slate landslide. She pointed at a spot on the mountain peak behind them.

Joel and Jedidiah looked around at the mountain peak. The landslide had uncovered not only a cave, but something much more exciting. Just above the shale, a chipped granite staircase led to a large platform. On the platform, two huge statues flanked a gigantic metal door, which reflected the sun's light as brightly as a mirror.

Jas landed beside the two priests of Finder just as Holly managed to make her way to the top of the shale slope.

Jedidiah presented the paladin with her cutlass, explaining how he had found it in his attempt to track Joel through Daggerdale. Holly smiled with joy at the return of the weapon that had belonged to her father. She thanked Jedidiah profusely. The old priest bowed graciously.

"It's more luck than I'd hoped for," Holly said, staring in wonder at her cutlass. "You gave me my weapon just in time for us to go explore the cave up there."

"We agreed we weren't going to waste a lot of time here," Jas said. "We should press on to the south before the day gets any later."

"We should at least find out what's inside," Holly insisted. "It could be important. Lord Randal will want to know."

"It's Shraevyn's tomb," Jedidiah said.

"Really?" Holly asked excitedly. "Are you sure?"

"Who's Shraevyn?" Joel asked.

"Who cares?" Jas sighed.

"He was a mage who created magical weapons for the warriors of the dales a long time ago," Holly said. "How do you know for sure it's Shraevyn's?" she asked Jedidiah.

Jedidiah looked up at the sky. As if he saw words written there, he recited,

"A stone cast with faerie fire
marked the mage's final resting place.
His apprentices laid Shraevyn in a casket
in the mountain cave at the west end of the valley.
The wizardess and the warrior stood watch
while the worthies of the world
paid homage to the weaponsmith.
Beside him rested the Sword of the Dales,
waiting to shatter the bonds of tyrants."

Holly's eyes widened. "You were there?" she asked.

Jedidiah laughed. "My dear, that was over three and a half centuries ago. Just how old do you think I am? No, better not answer that. I was quoting from 'The Lay of Shraevyn,' translated, of course, from the elvish."

"The Sword of the Dales," Holly whispered. "Is that a great weapon?"

"It must have been," Jedidiah answered. "Shraevyn crafted it."

"I can't just leave here without finding out more," Holly insisted.

"We haven't got enough manpower to go looting a crypt," Jas insisted. "Besides, they're always loaded with traps and tricks."

"It might be better to let Lord Randal investigate with several stout men of his own choosing," Jedidiah suggested.

"But that could take days," Holly argued. "We can't risk the Zhents discovering what's in there first."

"We will lead the Zhents away from this place when we leave," Jedidiah said. "As for the time, that I may be able to shorten." He whistled and cupped his hands together. When he opened his hands again, a golden warbler hopped from his palm to his finger—the same sort of bird Joel had seen in his vision. The bird tilted its head to look up at the old priest

with one eye. It peeped expectantly. "Speak a message to Lord Randal," Jedidiah told the paladin. "Keep it short," he added.

"Lord Randal," Holly began tentatively. Her voice wavered, but she grew more confident as she spoke, "Shraevyn's tomb has been found," she reported. "Uncovered. At the end of Giant Craw Valley. If you hurry, you may reach it before the Zhentarim learn of it. I travel south now. Your faithful servant, Holly." She looked up at Jedidiah. "Is that all right?"

"Perfect," the priest said. He whistled at the bird and raised his hand. The golden warbler circled to gain altitude, then took off to the southeast.

Holly smiled with pleasure. "Thank you," she said to Jedidiah.

"You're most welcome. It is the least I could do for the service you have rendered me," he said.

"What service?" Holly asked.

"Looking after my student here," the old priest said, patting Joel on the back. "Thank you both," he said, nodding to Jas.

"You'll get my bill later," Jas muttered. "Can we leave now?" she asked Joel.

Joel looked at Jedidiah. The old priest smiled but said nothing.

"I guess we should be off, then," the young bard answered.

They left the valley riding the Zhents' horses. The horses without a rider they tied together and led along behind them. Holly looked back on the valley and noted to her satisfaction that the exposed crypt entrance couldn't be seen from the magical stone.

As they rode south through the foothills, Jedidiah entertained Holly and Joel with song after song. The old priest's repertoire seemed infinite. Joel sang along with a few he knew. When Holly asked shyly to be taught some of the

songs, Jedidiah undertook the task with pleasure. Joel had always admired Jedidiah's eagerness to teach others, even those without much talent. What the paladin lacked in tone, she made up for with enthusiasm. Jedidiah picked out cheerful songs well suited to the girl's nature. Jas scowled and, declaring she was going to keep a lookout, took to the air.

Toward late afternoon they stopped to rest beside a stream. As Holly splashed in the icy water farther downstream, Joel and Jedidiah filled the waterskins.

"She's quite charming," Jedidiah noted, nodding in the direction of the paladin. "She sings with her whole heart."

Joel nodded in agreement. He looked up, hoping to spot Jas, but the winged woman was nowhere in sight. "I guess Jas doesn't care much for music," he said.

Jedidiah shook his head. "From what you've told me, HI wager she's hoping to spot her ship. A spelljamming helm is too rare to let slip away. Once you've got the wanderlust for the spheres, you don't return happily to being a groundling."

"What kind of helm?" Joel asked.

"Spelljamming," Jedidiah said. "It's what makes her ship fly. Any priest or mage can make it move, using the power of spellcasting. I don't know how she thinks she's going to get it away from your Banite priestess, though."

"She was planning to ask for Elminster's help," Joel explained.

"A priestess of Bane traveling around with a spelljammer . . . that just might interest the old sage," Jedidiah remarked. "It certainly piques my curiosity."

"So you think we could help her?" Joel asked. "Jas, I mean."

"I think you should finish your pilgrimage to the Lost Vale first, as you promised Finder you would," Jedidiah said. "Jas can wait."

"She's afraid the Banites will figure out how to take it outside the sphere, whatever that means," Joel said, "and

strand her here."

"I can't imagine why they'd want to do that. They'd end up little fish in a very big pond. Still, if she's worried about that, why is she still with you? Why doesn't she take off and search for it?"

"She feels she owes Holly for saving her life, so she wants to be sure the paladin gets home safely. Do you think Walinda really does hear Bane's voice?" Joel asked.

"I hope not," Jedidiah replied.

Joel felt a breeze, and Jas landed beside the stream. She had glided down on them as silently as an owl.

"See anything?" Joel asked, half hoping that she hadn't.

Jas shook her head. "I was hoping that once the Bane witch got what she wanted from the Temple in the Sky, she'd head back to the Spiderhaunt Woods—to the village she came from—and I'd be able to spot my ship and find some way to get it away from her. I don't know why I bothered. Now that she's sacrificed most of her village's population, there's no point in her returning there. She could be anywhere by now."

The winged woman rode with the rest of the party until they stopped for the night.

They set up camp in the foothills on a bluff from which they could survey Daggerdale for miles to the north, south, and west. Jas left the horses to graze in a meadow below the bluff while Joel and Jedidiah collected firewood and Holly finished cleaning the pheasants she'd shot that morning. They had just finished their meal of pheasant, berries, and hard black bread from the Zhentilars' saddlebags when a howling rose from the dale to their north.

"Nine hells!" Jas cursed with fury. "We forgot to make sure he was dead this time," she growled at Joel.

"Well, we could hardly dig him out from beneath the rubble just to burn him," Joel argued.

"We don't know it's Bear," Holly said.

"It's him," Jas said. "I'd know that howl anywhere."

"Bear. That's the man the Xvimists transformed into a creature to track you, right?" Jedidiah asked.

"He said he could feel our power wherever our feet touched the earth," Holly explained.

"He also said he would have lost us but for the power of the fourth one traveling with us," Jas added. She glowered angrily at Jedidiah. "That was you, wasn't it? You've been following us."

Joel looked questioningly at the old priest.

Jedidiah looked up sheepishly at the young bard. "It's true. I have been following you since you escaped from the Temple in the Sky," he admitted. "Finder asked me to look after you in case you needed any help."

"Instead of helping us, you've been acting as a beacon," Jas complained.

"I'm sorry," Jedidiah apologized. "I had no idea."

Joel's mind was racing with questions. Why was Finder so protective of him, to the point of troubling the older priest with his safety? Didn't Finder or Jedidiah trust his ability to reach the Lost Vale? Had the pilgrimage to the Lost Vale been a test? Was that why Jedidiah hadn't revealed himself until they'd been pinned in the valley?

"I suppose," Jedidiah said, "it would be best if I left you and led this creature away."

"No!" Joel said suddenly. "You can't risk going off in this wilderness alone."

"In case you hadn't noticed," Jas countered, "he got here alone. According to Bear, he's got a lot of power. He can take care of himself."

"No," Holly said. "If it is Bear, he may easily have found reinforcements. There are plenty of Zhentilar units patrolling the countryside, some commanded by priests of Xvim. It's folly to travel with that sort of offeree tracking you without someone to watch your back, no matter how powerful you are. We should stick together. And if you try to sneak off,"

she added, waving a finger in Jedidiah's face, "we'll have to come after you. So don't even think about it."

Jedidiah smiled sheepishly at the paladin's reprimand. He looked at Joel.

"She's right," the younger bard agreed. He gave Jas a warning glare not to contradict him.

"Well," Jedidiah said, stretching and yawning, "if we're going to be outrunning this dark stalker and Zhent patrols, we'd better get some rest. I'll take that rock over there for a pillow if no one else has claimed it."

Exhausted from flying, Jas begged off from the first watch. Joel and Holly sat together on the bluff, watching the new moon rise.

"Somewhere around here," Holly said, "maybe on this very bluff, Lord Randal's great-great-great-grandfather and his entourage died trying to destroy a tribe of vampires that plagued his people. They killed every last vampire, only to be torn apart by wolves."

"Are there any happy tales in Daggerdale's history?" Joel asked teasingly.

"One day soon there will be," Holly said, but Joel could not get her to say more.

Firestars like those around Anathar's Dell settled around their cookfire, magically absorbing its energy, eventually extinguishing it, but the night was too warm to worry about it. The breeze wafting up from the dale was laden with the perfume of night-blooming flowers. Unfortunately, it also carried the howling up the bluff. The noise was growing closer, but there was no sign of any Zhentilar patrols.

Holly woke Jas for the second watch. Joel was considering taking Jedidiah's watch so the old man could sleep, but the elderly priest woke on his own, looking far more fresh and alert than Joel. The young bard settled down near Holly. Despite the howling, Joel felt completely safe with Jedidiah on watch. He wondered if his trust in the old man wasn't a little childish, but then he remembered how Bear had

claimed to sense so much power in "the fourth one." The young bard fell asleep within minutes.

Joel dreamed it was dawn. The sky grew as red as blood, and the sun crested the horizon, burning with white flame. The sun rushed toward him, then passed him, knocking him to his knees with a blast of hot wind. When he looked up again, Holly's form was a black silhouette against the brilliant, white-hot sun. Although Joel heard nothing, he knew the sun was speaking to the girl.

"Joel, wake up!" Holly cried out, shaking him by the shoulders.

Joel's eyes snapped open, and he sat bolt upright, expecting to see the unnatural dawn. It was still night. The air was cool. Joel was bathed in sweat, however, as if he'd slept too close to the fire, but the fire was out. Holly appeared to be damp, too.

"What's wrong?" the bard croaked, his throat parched.

Holly mopped her brow with her sleeve. "I had a dream, but I think it was more than that. The sunrise came to me to warn me that something bad is going to happen. I think—I think it was a vision from Lathander," the girl whispered.

Joel shuddered. Having a vision from Finder hadn't seemed too alarming, but having Holly's vision from the god she served—that was disturbing.

"Did the vision give you any more details?" the bard asked, trying to keep calm by analyzing the vision.

"There's evil approaching," the paladin warned. "Great evil."

"Bear?"

Holly shook her head.

"The Zhents? More priests of Xvim?"

"No," the girl replied with more headshakes. "Something evil is coming. Something as cold as death and as dark as a crypt, smelling of dust, so evil it hurt to sense its presence." Joel sighed. Finder's vision had been slightly cryptic, but Lathander's was maddeningly obtuse.

"There was one other thing," Holly said.

"What?" Joel asked eagerly.

"You weren't there. There was death all around, but you were gone."

Joel looked around for Jedidiah, hoping perhaps the old priest would have some insight into what Holly had sensed.

Jas stood lookout near the edge of the bluff, but of Jedidiah there was no sign.

"Jas," Joel called out, "where's Jedidiah?" His question echoed through the hills, a chorus of Joel's inquiring about the old priest.

Jas turned from the bluff and strode back to the campsite.

"You want to shout your question again?" the winged woman growled softly, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "I don't think they heard you back at the Flaming Tower."

"Where is he?" Joel hissed.

"He walked down into the brush," she answered, tossing her head in the direction of the bushes they'd crawled through to reach the top of the bluff.

"You know he was thinking of trying to lead Bear off our track. How could you let him leave? How could you be so selfish?" he demanded accusingly.

"It was just a call of nature," Jas said, exasperated with the bard's anxiety. "He went down there only a few minutes ago. If he had been gone much longer, I would have wakened you."

Joel huffed. He snatched up his sword and tied it to his belt. "I'm going to check on him," he said to the paladin. "You better stay with Jas."

The young bard scrambled downhill through the brush, righting the urge to shout out for the old priest, praying he was still nearby.

At the base of the hill was a tiny clearing that not too long ago must have been a pond. Cattails swayed about the edges, but the center was solid ground covered with meadow grass. Jedidiah stood in the center of the clearing.

Joel sighed with relief, but then he was left to wonder what Jedidiah was up to.

The old priest had stripped to the waist; his shirt and tunic and cloak lay to one side of the clearing. Light flashed from something in his hands. Jedidiah held the object up over his head with both hands. It appeared to be a huge multifaceted yellow gemstone, with a jagged bottom, as if it had been broken from a larger piece. The light from the gem grew, not brighter but larger, turning the meadow grass to a soft golden color.

Jedidiah, too, turned golden. In the light, the priest didn't appear so old. Joel could see the muscles in his arms and chest were not only tense but also well-toned, like those of a much younger man, and his face didn't appear quite so wrinkled.

Jedidiah uttered some words Joel couldn't quite catch, then sang a scale, up and down the notes, over and over again. Steam began pouring from the old priest's body. Then Joel realized the steam had a radiance of its own. Blue light was seeping out of Jedidiah's body. The blue light curled upward, drawn into the yellow stone just as the haze from Walinda's dead followers had been drawn into the statue of Iyachtu Xvim.

Finally Jedidiah ceased singing. He spoke one more word, and the steaming blue light stopped pouring from his body. In another few moments all of it was sucked into the yellow stone. Jedidiah lowered the stone to his chest. The illusion of youth vanished. His face was wrinkled, his muscles sagging, perhaps even more than before. He staggered and fell to one knee.

Joel rushed forward and took the old man's arm to help him rise. Jedidiah looked up, startled, but when he recognized the young bard, he grinned sheepishly. "I'll be fine in a moment," the old man said, grasping the younger man's arm with two thin, bony hands. "What did you do, Jedidiah?" Joel asked. "What is that stone?"

"Just a little sleight of hand," the priest said, allowing Joel to pull him up. "Dark stalkers, transformed hunters like Bear, can only sense living power. So I siphoned a little of it off into this," Jedidiah explained, holding up the stone. "A little gift from Finder."

"It looked like you siphoned a lot of it off," Joel argued. He scooped up the priest's shirt and handed it to him. "Are you sure you're all right?"

Jedidiah nodded, pulling on his shirt, then taking his tunic from the young bard.

Just then Joel heard Holly scream. From the bluff overhead came the sounds of metal striking against metal and shouts of the paladin and the winged woman.

An icy fist gripped Joel's heart, and he recalled Holly's vision. Cursing himself for a fool, he raced back through the brush, shouting for Jedidiah to follow.

The climb up to the bluff in the dark seemed endless to Joel, knowing something threatened his friends. He was puffing by the time he cleared the brush. He pulled the sword from his belt.

Holly must have built up the fire in his absence, for the campsite was illuminated by leaping flames. The paladin and Jas both stood with their backs to the fire, peering out into the darkness. They were both bleeding from small cuts on their arms and faces. Dark shapes lay vanquished at their feet, but many more surrounded them. Joel could see only their silhouettes in the firelight, and he was unable to tell whether the shapes were men or beasts.

The bard gave a shout to distract the creatures. Suddenly a dark form loomed up on his left. Remembering Bear, Joel reacted instinctively, stabbing hard and fast.

His blade sunk deep into the creature's chest. For all the resistance Joel felt, the body might have been an old weathered sack. The blade made a sound like an axe driven into rotten wood. Joel yanked his weapon back, and a taloned hand lashed at his face but missed. Then the

creature fell at Joel's feet, nothing more than a collection of ancient, shattered bones encased in sun-dried flesh.

It was a zombie, Joel realized, and the creatures surrounding Holly and Jas were zombies and skeletons. The firelight glinted on blackened bones and yellowish flesh as the undead creatures rallied for another attack. More of the creatures were pulling themselves out of the ground.

Joel remembered Holly's story that Lord Randal's ancestor and his entourage had died here. If the origin of the undead occurred to the paladin, she did not let it affect how she fought. She decapitated one walking corpse with a clean swing, which ended in the chest of a second zombie. She ducked the sluggish blow of a third monster, then reversed the arc of her blade, driving it into her attacker's skull.

Jas was holding her own by half leaping, half flying up, then coming down on the skeletons with a kicking attack. The ancient bones cracked and crumbled to the ground.

Despite their successes, both women had received wounds, and it was obvious they were tiring. Yet the undead continued to rise from the ground.

Joel fought his way toward the fire. A skeletal hand hanging from a tattered muscle tore a gash across his cheek just beneath his eye. It took one blow to send the creature's bones back to the earth, but the cut on his face continued to burn like fire. Another zombie was armed with an ancient, rusty sword, which shattered into a hundred fragments when Joel struck it with his younger blade.

"Where did they come from?" Joel shouted. Such creatures did not just rise from the earth of their own volition.

"I can't tell," Holly replied. "They seem to be trying to drive us off the edge of the bluff. Where's Jedidiah?" "Not far behind me," Joel answered.

"Already here," boomed the voice of the elderly priest from the darkness just beyond the campfire's light. He

began a familiar-sounding chant that sounded more like a drumbeat than a song. A reddish haze surrounded him.

The zombies and skeletons turned to face Jedidiah, the remains of their bodies twitching in rhythm with the priest's chant.

Joel's worry that the creatures would do his mentor harm was soon dispelled. One by one, the skeletons saluted the old priest with a raised hand, then crumbled to dust. The closest zombies slumped in place, their animating energy gone. The zombies farthest from the old priest sank back into the earth, pulling rocks and dirt back over their retreating forms.

Jas smashed at a few of these even as they fled. Then she sank to the ground, exhausted.

The radiance about Jedidiah subsided as the last of the undead disappeared. He looked at Joel with surprise. "Why didn't you try quelling the undead with a chant?" he asked.

Joel winced, realizing now that Jedidiah had taught him the same chant in Berdusk. It was a common ritual to protect against the undead, to return them to their graves and eternal sleep. The chant was actually quite basic, Joel remembered, and the results were effective. It wasn't the first time he'd forgotten he possessed priestly skills just when they would have been the most useful.

The Rebel Bard hung his head. "I just started swinging my sword without thinking," he replied.

Jedidiah looked grim. "You are still uncomfortable using the gifts Finder has given you, " he noted. "It's early yet. You'll get used to it. You'll see."

The old man gave the breast pocket of his vest a pat. He patted the pocket again, then reached into it with his hand, an alarmed expression on his face. Jedidiah began patting his other pockets. His brow furrowed, then his expression grew angry.

"What have you lost?" Joel asked.

"That gemstone I had," Jedidiah snapped impatiently. "I had it a moment ago, just before I came up the hill."

Holly moved up beside Joel, her face stricken with worry. "Joel?" she began.

Joel held his hand up, signaling Holly to wait. "You never told me exactly what it was," he said to Jedidiah.

"It's a relic, an artifact," Jedidiah explained hastily, "a tool created by Finder when he was mortal. It's half of the finder's stone. Finder took half with him to the Abyss when he destroyed Moander and left the other half with the saurials in the Lost Vale. It's a faultless locator, and it holds power, as you saw."

"Joel?" Holly tried interrupting again.

"We'll find it," Joel assured Jedidiah, his eyes combing the ground around the fire circle. "We'll start here and work our way back. Maybe one of the undead knocked it loose from your pocket."

"None of them got near me," Jedidiah insisted with irritation. "I had to have dropped it on the way up the hill."

"Joel? Holly snapped.

The Rebel Bard looked back at the paladin. Her eyes were wide with terror.

"What is it, Holly?" Joel snapped.

"It's—it's coming," the girl whispered. "The evil in my vision. There's something familiar about it ... something horrible."

Jedidiah swung about with a feral growl.

A red light issued from beneath the edge of the bluff, just like the light in Holly's vision.

Slowly, majestically, bathed in red like the sun, a great wooden vessel rose above the bluff. It was Jas's ship, stolen from the illithids, now a floating shrine to Bane. Joel suddenly realized what, or rather who, had made the undead restless enough to rise from their graves.

Walinda stood at the ship's prow, a pair of lit iron braziers on either side of her. She still wore her shoulder protectors

and bracers, but she had removed the rest of her armor. She was dressed now in a long, low-cut black velvet gown that seemed to shimmer red in the reflected fire from the braziers. Her hair hung loose about her shoulders like a maiden's.

"Well met, Poppin," she greeted Joel, giving him a warm smile. Then she turned to face Jedidiah, holding out her hand. In it sat Jedidiah's half of the finder's stone, glowing with brilliant gold light. With a cruel smile, she asked, "Are you looking for this, old man?"

Nine

The Essence Of Bane

Joel could have easily predicted what happened next, but he just wasn't quick enough to prevent it. Jas leapt high into the air. Then, with her sword in front of her, she dived toward the priestess of Bane.

Walinda, as cool as ice, raised her hand and commanded, "Fall!"

The winged woman's body jackknifed in midair, and she plummeted downward. She landed hard, all in a heap, on the deck of her former ship.

Holly cried out and made a move to rush forward, but Jedidiah had the presence of mind to grab the paladin and hold her back.

"Let me go," Holly cried. "She's hurt!" "She'll keep," the older priest said brusquely. "You can't help her if you're hurt, too," he warned. To Joel, he said, "I take it this is the infamous Walinda of Bane."

The younger priest nodded. "She cast a command spell. Do you think it was some trick?" he asked in a whisper.

Jedidiah motioned uncertainty with his hands. "Introduce us," he said calmly. Joel looked surprised for a moment, then nodded. If there was one thing Jedidiah knew, it was how to set the tone.

"Jedidiah," the young man said, "allow me to present to you Walinda of Bane. Walinda, this is Jedidiah of Finder."

Walinda bowed before the old priest. It hadn't been lost on her that Joel had presented her first, implying Jedidiah's rank was higher than hers. On the deck beside Walinda, Jas was recovering from her fall. She'd managed to sit up, but it was clear from the unnatural angle of her right leg that she wouldn't be able to stand.

Jedidiah bowed back at the priestess, even lower and more gracefully. "A very smooth extraction," he complimented Walinda, indicating with a nod of his head the stolen finder's stone in the priestess's hand. "I don't think I've encountered a lighter touch since the halfling Olive Ruskettle picked my pipe from my pocket. Done a lot of training with a thief's guild, have you?"

Walinda glared at the old priest. "You are very glib for a man who's just lost a holy relic of his god," she noted.

"Well, glibness is a thing we priests of Finder are especially good at," Jedidiah retorted. "Like priests of Bane excelling in sarcasm. You didn't steal my stone and then make this appearance just to impress us with your flair for drama. What do you want, Walinda of Bane?"

"I have a deal for you, priest of Finder. Won't you come aboard so we might discuss it more comfortably? promise you and your party safe passage—providing," she added with a glance at the winged woman who lay on the deck, moaning, "you can keep your pets in line."

"I need a moment, please, to discuss your offer with my colleagues," Jedidiah replied politely, smiling up at the priestess.

Walinda nodded graciously.

Jedidiah turned about and pulled Joel and Holly close.

"You can't go aboard that vessel," Holly insisted.

"Young lady, I have no choice," Jedidiah answered. "I must have the finder's stone back."

"It's some sort of trick, '-'" Holly said. "There's something else aboard that ship, something profoundly evil. The worst evil I have ever felt in my life. It's so strong it's painful to sense it."

"Is there, now?" Jedidiah asked. "How interesting. It doesn't change anything, however. The finder's stone is a relic of my god."

"Is it worth your life?" Holly argued. "Your soul?"

Jedidiah sighed. "Just before we were attacked, I put a large share of my own power into the finder's stone so that the Xvimists' dark stalker could no longer sense me from a distance. Finder needs my powers. I cannot just let Walinda fly off with the stone without trying to barter for it."

"When you barter with evil, evil grows stronger," Holly said through clenched teeth. "If that's not enough, you must know that you cannot trust her."

Jedidiah looked to Joel for support.

The young bard could sympathize completely with the old priest. Arguing with the paladin was an uphill battle. Remembering how weakened the old priest had been when he finished siphoning his power into the stone, Joel had no qualms about helping him to regain it. He attacked Holly's arguments with an appeal to her emotions that he knew she could not reject.

"Holly, Walinda has Jas," Joel pointed out quietly but firmly. "If we tell Walinda to leave without bartering, what do you think she'll do with Jas—hand her back to us unharmed, or keep her to torture her some more?"

The blood drained from Holly's face, and she lowered her head.

As if to emphasize the point, Jas fluttered her wings and tried to stand, then yelped in pain and crashed back to the deck of the ship.

"Perhaps you should stay here," Jedidiah suggested. "I will deal with this woman myself."

"No," Joel said. "I'm going with you. You may need my help."

Holly looked up. "You may need mine as well to help with Jas," she said.

"If this evil gives you pain—" Jedidiah began.

"I am not afraid of pain," Holly answered softly. "I will accompany you."

"Very well," Jedidiah said, respectful of the paladin's courage. He turned around and stepped toward the edge of the bluff. Joel and Holly stood just behind him.

"We will board your ship to parlay," the old priest announced.

The ship edged close to the bluff. First Joel, then Holly, leapt across to the railing and jumped down to the deck. Joel turned back to offer Jedidiah a hand, but the old priest made the jump just as easily as a boy.

Holly hurried to Jas's side. The woman's leg was broken just above the ankle. "When I fix this, you have to lie still," she whispered to the winged woman.

"Just so Jedidiah can get his stupid rock back?" Jas snarled.

"Because you are not thinking clearly. That attack was the clumsiest I have ever seen," the paladin murmured. "You cannot let your hatred warp your reason."

Jas sighed. "Out of the mouths of paladins . . ." she muttered. "Right. I'll keep my cool until the witch betrays us. Then I'm going for her throat."

Holly began a healing prayer for the winged woman's broken leg.

Watching the two women whispering, Walinda said to Jedidiah, "Keep a tether on your pigeon, or I will do more than clip its wings next time."

"Threats are uncalled for," Jedidiah chided the woman. "You wanted to discuss a deal. I'm listening."

"Please, make yourselves comfortable," Walinda said. She sat down on the only chair on the deck, a high-backed seat

carved from the tusk of some colossal beast.

If Walinda had hoped to put the old priest in his place by making him stand, her plan backfired. Jedidiah removed his cloak with a flourish and lay it on the floor near the priestess's feet. He lowered himself to the deck and lounged there like a desert prince relaxing in a harem. He was near enough to the priestess that he could have reached out and touched her knee. Joel stood behind him, trying to convey the look of someone prepared to defend the old priest against any assaults. Behind Walinda, a dark doorway led to a cabin. Joel watched it warily, remembering Holly's warning of something evil.

"You are very bold for someone dealing from a position of weakness," Walinda addressed Jedidiah as she held up the finder's stone in the hand farthest from him.

Joel wondered if it would be worth the risk to simply jump the woman and wrestle the stone from her hand. He looked again at the darkened doorway and decided it would probably be most unwise.

"You and Poppin are very alike," Walinda said. "I will look forward to subduing Finder's priests if they are all like the two of you. You are really quite remarkable."

"It's true," Jedidiah said with an arrogant smile. "But you are remarkable as well. The hierarchy of the Black Lord's church was never known for encouraging the ambitions of women, not even talented ones. Yet Joel tells me you are a Dreadmaster. Did you earn your title before or after Torm turned your god into so much dog food?"

Walinda glowered at Jedidiah, but she didn't react to his goads. "The Black Lord named me to his priesthood himself, before the Time of Troubles," the priestess replied proudly. "After the Black Lord was killed in combat, I remained faithful, knowing that our lord would rise again. The night before the Cyricists began the Banedearth, destroying any true followers of Bane who would not convert to Cyric, a voice spoke to me. The voice warned me of what was to

come and decreed what action I should take. I gathered those who were most faithful to Bane and led them away from Zhentil Keep. We traveled until we reached the Spiderhaunt Woods. There, in a cave, my lord's spirit was waiting for his true followers.

"When his avatar died in the Time of Troubles, Lord Bane's spirit hid in that cave. We fed his spirit with our worship. Two weeks ago, the spirit brought down this ship from the sky, and we took possession of it in Bane's name. The spirit took command of the ship, and we journeyed north to the Temple in the Sky. In the temple, which was once dedicated to Lord Bane, there were buried secrets that Lord Bane would need to regain his former power and glory. The price was high...."

"Yes. Joel already told me how you paid for it. What secret could be so important that it was worth the lives of all those faithful people?" Jedidiah asked scornfully.

"The location of the Hand of Bane," Walinda said.

"The Hand of Bane," Jedidiah repeated.

"Yes. Its location has been hidden for centuries, yet I was able to find it." Walinda held up the sheets of paper she'd removed from the book in the Temple in the Sky. The edges were scabbed over with dried blood. "So my followers died for a great cause."

Jedidiah leaned forward. "Why would Bane need you to locate the Hand of Bane?" the old priest asked.

"You do not know?" Walinda asked. "Allow me to explain. You will find this very interesting, Poppin," she said, smiling up at Joel. "Gods are made of many elements. They have a physical body and mind. Torm slew my lord Bane's body, but it still exists. It floats in the astral plane beside the bodies of other long-dead gods. Gods also possess an essence—a personality, a spirit that binds them to their followers. They also possess power—huge amounts of raw energy, beyond the ken of mortals. If a god is destroyed, his followers can perform a complicated ritual to bind together these

elements-body, essence, and power—and resurrect the god. Some gods have the wisdom to create a magical artifact that will make the ritual simpler and more efficient, so that its performance does not require a year's time, or hundreds of followers, or the blood sacrifice of a thousand innocent beings."

"And the Hand of Bane is such an artifact," Joel guessed.

Walinda nodded. "Your student is very apt," she complimented Jedidiah. "Now you understand my sacrifice. With the Hand of Bane in my possession, I can return my lord to his rightful place as a god of the Realms."

Jedidiah waved a hand, as if to brush aside Walinda's comments. "You misunderstood my question entirely. I did not ask why Bane would want you to recover the Hand of Bane. I asked why Bane needed you to locate it for him. Didn't the old boy remember where he'd put it? Getting senile in his death, is he?"

Walinda raised her head proudly. "Bane is not a simple god like your Finder. His plans are subtle and complex. Centuries ago he gave the hand to a loyal priest in the Temple in the Sky to hide where no god, not even Ao, could steal it. The priest was charged to keep the location of the hand a secret. On his deathbed, on Bane's orders, the priest passed the information on to his successor. So it continued for centuries. When the beast cult took over the floating rock, the last priest hid in a secret temple and wrote down all the secrets in his keeping, so that Lord Bane might send me to discover the Hand of Bane when it was needed."

Jedidiah laughed heartily for a moment. "A good story," he said. "I was beginning to think you had fallen prey to some elaborate ruse of Iyachtu Xvim, but now I realize it must be Cyric behind all this. A lie that good could only be his."

"It is not a lie!" Walinda snapped, clenching the finder's stone as if she might crush it.

"Of course, Cyric and Xvim could be in it together," Jedidiah commented. He looked back up at the enraged Walinda and said, 'Think for a moment, woman. Bane is dead. Iyachtu and Cyric both have an interest in seeing that he stays dead for all eternity. They want to be sure the Hand of Bane is destroyed, but first they've got to find it. They need someone who might know where to look. They look around for a likely target, and there you are, stubbornly persevering in your faith in Bane, keeping his faithful from worshiping either the Godson or the mad god. You've been a thorn in their side. They will have vengeance on you for defying them by getting you to give them the hand.

"Cyric, using Bane's voice, warns you to leave Zhentil Keep. He keeps you on hold for a few years while he launches a few other plans. Then he says it's time to find the Hand of Bane. You've probably heard a rumor of it, or maybe the Godson knew something about his father's faithful in the Temple in the Sky. As an added bonus, Iyachtu gets to eat the souls of your followers. Of course, both gods will keep you in the dark until you've handed them the hand. Then they can tell you that you were the one to betray Lord Bane to them."

"It is not true," Walinda growled, rising angrily to her feet. "Do you think I would mistake an imposter for my lord's voice? Never! It was Lord Bane who spoke to me." Joel noted how Jedidiah's eyes followed the finder's stone. The priestess now seemed so overwrought that the Rebel Bard had just made up his mind to rush her and try to grab the stone.

From the darkened doorway of the cabin, a raspy, dark, sepulchral voice spoke. "Cease your whining, fool woman. Can't you see the old priest is only goading you?"

Whoever had spoken remained hidden in the shadows, but Joel could sense that something very evil and very powerful had come onto the deck. Suddenly the bard completely lost his nerve. A wave of nausea and vertigo

swept through him, nearly knocking him down. A cold pang of fear lanced through him, paralyzing him. Then despair settled on his heart, a despair so heavy that tears welled in the young man's eyes.

Joel looked at the other members of his party to see their reaction to the evil presence. Jas was crouched in a fetal position, her wings covering her body. Holly's face was twisted in fear, and yet the paladin was trying to stand. Her struggle was short and in vain. She fell to her knees, pressing her hands to her temples.

Jedidiah, however, didn't seem to mind the presence, except to wrinkle his nose as if he'd smelled something unpleasant. He stood tall and straight, like a mast in a storm. Joel took a deep breath and steadied himself. If Jedidiah could stand up to this assault, he wouldn't let the old priest down. The Rebel Bard forced himself to peer into the shadows inside the cabin door.

A figure stepped out of the shadows. It stood upright, taller than the average man, wearing a chest plate of black armor polished to a mirrorlike finish and engraved with the symbol of Bane in blood-red filigree. The figure's broad shoulders were covered with huge spiked plates, which made the creature seem even more massive. Its arms and legs were covered with black fabric, which in turn was covered with fine scales, as supple as a black dragon's hide. A red cape fluttered behind the figure.

The body beneath the armor was even more alarming. The creature, Joel realized, had to be some sort of undead thing. Its skin was as creased as a crumpled piece of paper, yellowed with age and so translucent that brown bone showed from beneath the skin. The flesh around its mouth had worn away, leaving tatters of skin about the creature's brown teeth. Its tongue was black. The sagging flesh of each of its cheeks bore a tattoo of a red lightning bolt. Where its eyes should have been were deep wells with a glimmering white ember of undead hatred at the bottom of each. Dry

shoots of white hair sprouted from its mostly bald head. Sparkling on its brow was a white diamond as large as a fingernail. "I am the essence of Bane," the creature said, its voice creaking like the iron gate of a crypt. "See me and fear me."

Joel flinched at the voice, while Holly covered her ears. Beneath her wings, Jas shuddered. Jedidiah bowed and said, "Greetings, Bane. You're not looking so lively, even for an essence. I was wondering if you were going to show yourself."

The creature gave a sharp, barking laugh and lurched forward. "You aren't looking quite yourself, either, priest of Finder," it said.

Jedidiah frowned and his brow furrowed.

The creature strode forward, and Walinda rose and stepped away from the chair. The creature reached out, and Walinda handed it the finder's stone. All the while, Joel noted, the priestess kept her head bowed and never raised it to look at the creature. The thing that claimed to be the essence of Bane sat down in the chair.

"I thought," the creature said, "to let my slave handle these negotiations. Once I realized who you were, however, I knew it would require someone with more skill to bargain with you. We will talk as one being of power to another."

"I'll be prepared to talk," Jedidiah replied, "when you stop painwracking my companions with your petty magic."

"It has always been my practice to begin my dealing from a position of strength, but if it will put you more at ease ..."

The creature shrugged.

Joel felt his fear and despair subside like an ocean tide. Holly was able to rise to her feet. Jas stirred beneath her wings and looked out at the creature with disgust.

"You've been duped, Walinda of Bane," Jedidiah said. "This isn't the spirit of Bane. It's a banelich, a former High Imperceptor of the church, made undead by Bane—a little gift Bane used to give to his most groveling mortal yes-men."

They go a little mad when they realize there is no greater power in death than there was in their pathetic lives. This one obviously has delusions of grandeur."

Walinda didn't look up at Jedidiah. Instead, she remained beside the creature with her head bowed.

"You are half right, priest of Finder," the creature said. "Centuries ago I was made a banelich by Lord Bane. Since the Time of Troubles, however, I have been much more. When Torm slew Bane, my god's spirit chose to honor me by housing itself in my form. I hold his personality, his ego, his essence. I can even grant this slave her clerical spells. I am now, for all intents and purposes, Bane."

"What do you want from us?" Joel demanded, his patience with this horror wearing thin.

"Ah, well. It is only fitting that my slave"—he waved his hand in Walinda's direction—"should have slaves of her own. It is also practical. Loyal though she is, the tasks I must set for her may be beyond her powers. I thought to reward her with slaves who would amuse her"—the banelich motioned with his hand to indicate Joel—"as well as those who would be useful," he added, waving his hand at Jedidiah, Holly, and Jas.

Walinda raised her head a fraction of an inch and met the young bard's look with a sly smile. Joel felt a flush rise to his face.

Holly stepped forward in front of Joel and declared hotly, "We are not slaves, and we will never serve such as you!"

"How bravely you speak, little paladin of Lathander," the banelich said with a gravely chuckle. "But how little you know. This one," he said, pointing at Jedidiah, "would do anything to regain the finder's stone. And this one," he said, pointing to Joel, "will do anything to help him. He may even find serving my slave pleasurable."

Joel caught Walinda watching him again, and he turned away, fixing his eyes firmly on Jedidiah. "We'll perform a service in exchange for the finder's stone, but we will not

serve you or yours," Jedidiah said sharply. "I presume the task you had in mind is retrieving the Hand of Bane."

The banelich nodded. "Naturally. You are familiar with some of the other planes, the homes of the gods and the tanar'ri and the archons. The outer planes share a common ground known as the Outlands. The hand of Bane is—"

"In Sigil," Jedidiah interrupted. "The Hub of the Universe, the Cage, City of Doors, Place of Mazes."

"You are every bit as clever as your reputation," the banelich said, its undead voice revealing the tiniest hint of surprise.

"Walinda said it was in a place where no god could steal it," Jedidiah explained. "That pretty much defines Sigil, doesn't it?"

The banelich nodded. "You will fetch for me the Hand of Bane. Then I will reward you with this bauble," he said, holding the finder's stone aloft in a skeletal hand. With that, the creature rose and walked back toward the darkness of the cabin.

Jedidiah stepped forward and called out, "Banelich!"

The banelich turned, and Joel felt the bottom drop out of his stomach again. The creature's hatred was so oppressive Joel's joints ached from trying to stand, and he had trouble breathing. He heard Holly whimper and Jas growl.

"Yes?" the banelich asked.

"When I fetch the Hand of Bane," Jedidiah said, "it will be for myself. I'll exchange it for the finder's stone."

The banelich pulled the tatters of its flesh back into a smile. It nodded in agreement to the subtle change Jedidiah had made to the wording of their bargain. Then it turned back to the door and disappeared into the cabin.

Joel breathed with relief when the weight of the creature's stare had been removed.

Walinda sat once again in the chair. "It is so good to have you aboard, Poppin," she said smiling at Joel. "And the rest

of you as well," she added, her eyes settling maliciously on Jas.

"We will use this ship to fly over the Desertsouth Mountains and into the Great Desert, Anauroch," the priestess informed them. "Buried under the sand are the ruins of the fabled kingdom of Netheril. There, among the debris of one of their ruined citadels, is a gate to the Outlands, the shared land of the outer planes. Our goal, the city of Sigil, rises from the center of the Outlands."

The gate you speak of is called Cat's Gate. I know the place," Jedidiah said. "You can drop us off at the mouth of the River Ashaba. We'll meet you at Cat's Gate four days hence."

"You will go with me to Netheril now," Walinda declared.

Jedidiah strode behind the chair and leaned over the priestess's shoulder. "Tell me, slave, can you surrender power and still wield it?" he asked sharply.

"No," Walinda replied automatically. She looked up, startled, at the old priest. "So you are acquainted with some of the tenets of my faith. What does that prove? You will still accompany me to Cat's Gate forthwith."

Jedidiah leaned in close to the priestess's ear and whispered, "When you held the finder's stone, you wielded power. But you surrendered that power to the disgusting monster you see fit to worship. Since it holds the finder's stone, I made my deal with it. I will recover the Hand of Bane because I must have the finder's stone back. If you want to help—and reap some of that abomination's gratitude—you will meet me at the gate. In the meantime, I will escort my friends to a place of safety where we can rest comfortably before the journey and I can gather together such items as we will need to find the Hand of Bane."

Jedidiah strode over to the ship's railing. "In any case, there is no way you can hold us against our will . . . unless you were to call on the banelich to aid you." Walinda glared at the older priest, and Joel realized what Jedidiah must have

already known: Walinda did not dare give the appearance of being weak before the banelich. The priestess shrugged and said, "There is no need to get off at the River Ashaba. This ship can carry you to the Lost Vale. That is where you're headed, isn't it?"

Jedidiah chuckled. "I'm not about to reveal the location of the Lost Vale to you, my dear. Finder has a temple there, and your god has a reputation of being a rude guest in other gods' temples. And after having been enslaved by Moander, the inhabitants of the vale would prefer to avoid the attentions of any more evil gods."

"I will discover it when I fly over the mountains," Walinda said with a shrug.

"You can try," Jedidiah said with a grin.

Joel nodded. The old priest had already explained to him that one could not find the Lost Vale by searching. It had to be entered magically.

"You'd best go inform your lord of our plans," Jedidiah told Walinda, "so he can set course accordingly. Due south of here should be perfect."

Walinda rose. "I will do so." She gave Joel a knowing smile, then went into the cabin.

After a few moments, the ship rose, then began to move southward so smoothly it felt as if they were on a raft adrift in a smooth-flowing river.

Joel joined Jedidiah at the ship's rail. They stared down at the bluff below them and watched the flames of their former campfire recede. "If the banelich is undead," the Rebel Bard asked in a whisper, "can't you destroy it or send it away with a prayer like you did with the skeletons and zombies?"

Jedidiah shook his head. "Walinda has consecrated this vessel to Bane. That makes it the banelich's turf. If I had the power that I put in the finder's stone, I might have taken the banelich in combat. Of course, if I had that power, the banelich wouldn't have come near me. It must have been watching us, and when it saw me pouring power into the

stone, it seized its chance. That cloak Walinda has—the one that shielded you from the beholder's sight in the Temple in the Sky—she must have been wearing that. I didn't feel her stealing the stone, but I remember smelling her—the perfume in her hair. If I hadn't been concentrating on turning the undead, I think I would have detected her. At any rate, we could fight the banelich, but there's no guarantee we'd all come out alive, and there's a good chance the finder's stone would be destroyed in the banelich's death throes. I'm sorry, Joel, but I just can't risk it."

"But you can't give the Hand of Bane to the banelich," Joel argued.

Jedidiah smiled grimly. "You were afraid of what Finder would think when you allied yourself with Walinda. Now I have to decide which of two evils would displease Finder more—the loss of his relic containing the power he granted me or the resurrection of Bane."

Jedidiah turned to gaze at Jas and Holly. They were leaning against the railing as far from the cabin as they could get. Holly was still clutching her head. Her paladin ability to sense evil was overloading from prolonged exposure to the banelich's proximity. Jas was stroking the girl's hair comfortingly, even though the winged woman herself looked deathly pale and exhausted.

"We may find another course yet," Jedidiah said, "between now and when we've retrieved the Hand of Bane. In the meantime, I'm going to help your companions. The banelich's painwrack spell can actually do physical damage to its victims. As priests of Finder, we were protected from it by our god, but they weren't. When Walinda returns, try to keep her entertained so she isn't goading Jas and Holly. The strife only serves to amuse the banelich and might possibly be nourishing °

Joel nodded. He watched the old priest tending Holly, singing a Dales lullaby while he used his healing power to

ease the pain in her head. Holly fell asleep with her head in Jas's lap. Jedidiah then spoke softly with Jas. The winged woman looked angry and disdainful, but as the bard spoke, her features softened. In the end, she nodded. Jedidiah laid his hands on her shoulders, and healing energy rippled about the woman's body. When the old priest had finished, he sat back beside Jas, leaning against the railing. Apparently the winged woman had come to some sort of peace with Joel's mentor, for she laid her head on his shoulder to sleep.

Jedidiah closed his eyes. Joel couldn't remember ever seeing the old priest so tired. For that matter, he couldn't remember ever seeing the old priest tired at all.

Joel waited for Walinda to reappear. It was nearly half an hour before she emerged from the cabin. She carried two goblets and joined him at the railing.

"Bane is most generous. He has agreed to the old man's request," she said.

"I don't think it was a request," Joel countered.

Walinda appeared not to have heard Joel's comment "I thought we might drink to our quest," she said, handing him a goblet.

Joel met the woman's forthright gaze. Several thoughts raced through his head. Jedidiah had asked him to entertain this woman, ostensibly to keep her from goading Jas and Holly into any fights, but the old priest was canny enough to realize that Walinda's interest in the Rebel Bard could be used to his advantage. For Jedidiah's sake, to regain the finder's stone, Joel was prepared to let himself be used. Still, there were things he could not do.

"I would prefer to drink to the return of the finder's stone to Finder's priests," he said, holding up his goblet.

"Then I will drink to the resurrection of Lord Bane," Walinda replied.

They sipped from their drinks. The liquid was mead, old and mellow.

"Is there nothing to which we can both drink?" Walinda asked demurely.

"I don't think we have all that much in common," Joel said, laying his left hand on the railing.

"I know," Walinda said "We can toast our escape from the Temple in the Sky."

Joel lowered his eyes with embarrassment.

"It's all right, Poppin," the priestess said, laying her right hand on his left. "I forgive you for abandoning me."

"Are Banites allowed to forgive?" Joel asked in mock surprise.

Walinda lowered her eyes as if she'd truly been chastised, then looked back up at the Rebel Bard. "Perhaps I should have said I understand that you were not at fault. My lord came to my rescue in this ship. He found a way to make it fly. His power grows with my faith," she said.

Recalling Jedidiah's explanation of the spelljammer, Joel replied, "Actually, any spellcaster, priest or mage, can make this ship fly."

Walinda's eyes half closed in anger.

"Your lord didn't tell you that?" Joel asked. "Well, you are just a slave," he added, relishing the chance to make her feel less exalted.

Walinda winced as if she'd been cut. She looked back up at Joel, a sly smile on her face. She slid her right hand up from his fingers into the cuff of his sleeve and squeezed his wrist. "See? We do have something in common. You want to degrade me."

Startled by the priestess's words and the gleam in her eyes, Joel pulled his arm away from her grasp and looked away, into the night sky. He couldn't think of a safe reply that was either honest or sensible.

"You remind me of myself," Walinda said, "before I met my god. I did not know my purpose. I could command a legion and break any man in interrogation. I could heal soldiers who had earned Bane's grace and raise the dead. I

had so many duties, yet my worship seemed to have no purpose. Now I know fully why I am a priestess. I serve Bane. I am his servant, his slave. It is the sweetest knowledge imaginable. There is nothing greater I can be."

Walinda took a sip from her goblet, then continued "You are a priest of Finder. You recreate art, search for new meaning in every variation, use your art to bring about change."

Joel looked back at Walinda with surprise.

"Yes," the priestess said. "You see, I understand something of the tenets of your faith as well as the old priest understands ours. But there is something that transcends the tenets of our separate faiths, something that I have, but so far you can only long for. You do not believe that your service has meaning. Are you just another whisper to Finder? Does he send you your spells automatically, without thinking, in that careless manner the gods sometimes have? If another were to take your place, if you were to become something besides a priest, would it make any difference?"

Joel sipped at the mead, wondering if it was really possible that this woman could have felt all the things that he had. Perhaps, he thought, she's just used some magic trinket to read my thoughts.

"If you heard his voice say your name and command you, as I heard Lord Bane's," Walinda whispered, "then you would know your purpose, and your heart would question nothing." The priestess leaned against Joel. The bard could smell the rose perfume in her hair and the spicy incense that clung to her velvet gown. She laid her hand on his neck. Her hand was very warm. She stroked his shoulder with the tips of her fingernails. Exhausted as the bard was from days of fleeing in the rough countryside, the woman's touch was quite relaxing.

"See," the priestess whispered, "you do want to be a slave."

Joel sighed softly. Then her words connected in his brain. He pulled away from her hand and stepped back from the railing. He could sense the danger in the woman's touch.

Walinda laughed at his reaction. She leaned forward and whispered, "Your reserve is very becoming, Poppin. I could break through all those barriers. Stay with me on the ship. Why walk miles through rough terrain when you can enjoy a smooth ride in the company of someone who knows what you really want? You can tell the old man you are protecting his stone."

"Does the finder's stone need to be protected?" he asked.

"You tell me. Lord Bane is fascinated by it, yet I do not think he understands it. If he thought it would bring him power, he would crack it like a nut. Would it bring him power?" Walinda asked.

Joel frowned at the question. Walinda must presume the stone held some power. Would the banelich really risk breaking the stone to try to steal Jedidiah's power? Could the creature succeed? Should I stay, Joel wondered, to be sure the stone is kept intact until Jedidiah returns?

"Think how you will feel, Poppin," Walinda said, "if you reach the Lost Vale and visit the temple to Finder, yet nothing changes. Finder does not need you." She pointed to Jedidiah. "Finder already has a priest with no doubts. A priest who doesn't question the meaning of his service. But you will never truly know the joy of serving. Your journey is in vain. When it is finished you will not even have your hope left." She drained her goblet and tossed it overboard.

Joel looked at Jedidiah with envy. The old priest was so favored that he carried half of the finder's stone. Or at least he did. Jedidiah had told him the pilgrimage to the Lost Vale was important, but did the elderly priest really understand him, know how he felt? Probably not. Walinda was right; Jedidiah had no doubts about being a priest.

"Stay with me and I will give you new hopes," the priestess offered, sliding her hands about his neck. She

squeezed at his throat ever so gently. Alarmed by the choking sensation, Joel dropped his goblet and snatched Walinda's wrists. She did not resist as he pulled her hands from his neck.

Joel released her and backed away another step. "Hopelessness . . . that's the specialty of the house in a temple of Bane, isn't it?" he asked. "And you are a master in its uses."

Walinda bowed her head in acknowledgment of the compliment.

"I took a vow to make a pilgrimage to the Lost Vale," the bard declared. "I will not be foresworn, whether my journey brings me closer to my god or not."

"Pride, not faith," Walinda commented. "Very well, Poppin. But I know you will be back. Only one god can enslave as Bane can. And when you return, I shall make you suffer for making me wait. But, then, making you suffer will not displease me either," she added. Then she strode from the deck into the cabin.

Joel shivered in the warm night air. The ease with which a murderess could manipulate his feelings filled him with despair. He wrapped his cloak about him and lay down on the deck, hoping sleep would release him from his fears and doubts. For a long time, he lay awake thinking of Walinda's threat that he would be back. Finally he heard Jedidiah singing softly in the darkness, another lullaby, only this one from Berdusk, a cradlesong Joel's own mother had once sung to Joel. Then the Rebel Bard slept.

Ten

Journey To The Lost Vale

Joel awoke to Jedidiah's gentle shaking of his shoulder.

"We've made port," the old priest said. "Time to kiss the earth, as the sailors say."

The sun was just rising over the Dagger Hills. Jedidiah was smiling, but he looked tired.

Joel sat up and wiped the sleep from his eyes. "Did you get any sleep?" he asked. "Someone should have awakened me to take a watch."

Jedidiah shook his head. "I couldn't have slept here anyway, and it was my turn to take the watch. Besides, there wasn't anything really to watch for. The banelich has made his deal. There aren't too many creatures about to fight a ship in the sky."

Joel stood up and looked around. The ship sat at the base of a magnificent waterfall. The water's flow was not great, but it fell over a hundred feet, sparkling in the sunshine. It would join with several other streams to become the River Ashaba. Holly and Jas were leaning over the railing, watching the water with obvious pleasure. Walinda was seated in her chair, watching the bard. "That woman gives me the shivers," Jedidiah muttered. He turned and bowed low to Walinda. "Until we meet again, lady," he addressed her.

"Are you sure you wouldn't rather stay?" she asked, her eyes still fixed on Joel. "Certain," Jedidiah replied.

"I wasn't addressing you, old man," the priestess snapped.

Jedidiah transformed his expression into the comically crestfallen look worn by mimes in Westgate. Joel was unable to keep himself from chuckling.

Jedidiah patted Joel on the back. "It's up to you," he said with a shrug. Then he whispered, "But I'd have another look at those teeth if I were you."

Joel met Walinda's gaze. The priestess smiled, showing her teeth. They were small, white, and perfect. They reminded Joel of doll teeth . . . unnatural. The bard shuddered. "I have to go," he said. He made a hasty bow and joined the others at the ship's rail.

From her chair, Walinda called out, "Four days, old man. Don't keep me waiting."

"Cat's Gate. I'll be there," the old priest called back. Beneath his breath he muttered, "Nag, nag, nag."

Holly giggled and even Jas smiled. The paladin unrolled a rope ladder down the side of the ship and began to climb down. Jedidiah followed as Jas fluttered into the air and settled near Holly. Joel climbed on the railing and looked back at Walinda. The priestess still sat in her chair, facing forward, soon to be left alone on a ship piloted by an undead priest of a dead god. "Do you ever get lonely?" Joel asked. Walinda turned her head to face the Rebel Bard. "I know you will return to me, Poppin," she answered. Joel scrambled down the ladder. The moment the bard's feet were on the ground, the great ship rose into the sky and disappeared behind the mountain. "Worst inn I've ever slept in," Jedidiah said. "Can't think why Volo would recommend it."

"I can still sense the banelich," Holly said. "They're not too far off."

"No doubt they'll try to follow us from the air," Jedidiah said. "It won't do them any good." He turned to Joel and explained. "For reasons of their own, Holly and Jas have agreed to accompany us to the vale."

"Oh," Joel said. He could understand Holly wanting to see the vale. To her mind, it was another dale, a possible ally, a secret to take back to Randal Morn. The young bard wondered about Jas's reasons, however. He remembered the long conversation Jedidiah had with the winged woman the night before. He couldn't begin to guess what agreement she'd reached with Jedidiah.

Jedidiah knelt down on the ground and spread his cloak out before him. He sang a simple grace, and the air above the cloak shimmered blue. When the old priest had finished, two fat loaves of bread lay on his cloak. Jedidiah held out his arms, inviting the others to join him.

When they'd finished their breakfast of Jedidiah's bread, plus cold, refreshing water from the stream, Jedidiah said, "Time, I think, to go. Do you need to pull out the map?"

Joel shook his head. He'd studied the map so often on his trip north he had large portions of his route memorized ... especially the route through the waterfall.

Joel stepped into the stream. The water was cold but bearable. He began to walk toward the waterfall.

"Why do I have a sinking feeling we're going to get all wet?" Jas grouched. "I hate getting my feathers damp."

"Pretend you're a duck," Jedidiah teased.

"Are we going behind the waterfall?" Holly asked with delight, chasing Joel into the stream. "No wonder Lord Randal's men couldn't discover how to get into your vale."

Jedidiah and Jas followed the bard and the paladin up the stream. The streambed was slick with small, rounded rocks. Closer to the waterfall, Joel discovered a chain beneath the water and picked it up. It was fastened to something behind the waterfall. The bard handed the end to Holly, and they used it to steady themselves as they pulled their way through the strong current until they came to the curtain of water.

The bard and paladin stood just behind the falls, looking out, as Jedidiah and Jas came through.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Holly asked, pointing back at the sunshine rippling through the waterfall. "Very," Joel agreed.

Jedidiah picked up a rock and sang a quick scale, imbuing the stone with a luminous glow.

Behind the waterfall was a cavern. The floor was covered with sand. Footprints ran from the back of the cavern to the waterfall. One set was booted; the other was unlike any print Joel had ever seen before—shaped like a dragon's, but smaller than a human's. "Whose tracks are these?" Holly asked. "The swordswoman Alias and one of the saurials," Jedidiah said.

They followed the footprints back to a staircase cut into the rock. It was a long climb up the stairs. They had to pause to rest twice. At the top of the stairs, they came out into a cave looking out over a valley. "Is that the vale?" Jas asked. Jedidiah laughed. "We've miles and miles to go yet." The cave contained a little shrine to Tyr, god of justice. Bits of ash from burned paper dusted the tiny altar before the god's statue.

They rested again before they followed the path that led from the cave down the opposite side of the mountain. The path stayed beneath the trees, skirting the edge of any clearings, or, if the trees thinned on an especially rocky slope, the trail passed through tunnels cut into the mountainside.

Jas smiled with satisfaction. "I hope that witch wastes lots of time trying to spot us from the air," she said.

They traveled along the path all morning, stopping only once to pick raspberries. By noon, they'd reached their goal: Finder's harp symbol, carved into the gray rock of a cliffside and painted white with a solution of lime. Etched into the cliffside just below the symbol of Finder was the outline of an archway. Jas knocked, pushed, pried, and tapped all about the outline of the archway but could discover no opening.

"It's solid rock," the winged woman insisted.

Joel nodded. He warmed up his voice with a scale, then, with a nod from Jedidiah, he began to sing a marching song the old priest had taught him. The song described the trail so far and asked Finder to unravel an easier path for the rest of the journey. It had two verses and a refrain. Jedidiah joined in on the refrain.

Joel closed his eyes and smiled as he sang the second verse. The weariness of the past few days seemed to drain away. He felt calm, as if he and Jedidiah were singing a drinking song in a tavern in Berdusk. The sounds

reverberated from the cliffside, amplifying their voices until they rang throughout the mountains.

Joel repeated the refrain alone, adding a little dance step, which never failed to amuse Jedidiah. Holly applauded.

Jas looked expectantly at the wall, but nothing happened. "Well?" she asked. "What's the problem? Were you off-key or something?"

Jedidiah snorted. "You may no longer be a groundling, my dear, but you are a barbarian. Off-key indeed!" And with that, the bard walked straight into the cliff face, disappearing into the rock like water into sand. He poked his head back out. "Don't dawdle. The door won't last forever."

Jas, Holly, and Joel plunged through the stone. When they emerged from the rock, they found themselves surrounded by fog. Jedidiah's light stone lit only a tiny area around them. Holly, off to one side of the others, stumbled and nearly fell in the thick fog. Jedidiah pulled her back toward the light. "Stick to the path," he said, indicating the trail marked by lines of glowing yellow stones. "No telling what might happen if you wander off."

Joel started off down the path, eager now to reach his destination. Behind him, Jas muttered a dark curse. Joel turned around. Jas's wings had transformed. In place of the pink-feathered, eaglelike appendages were four planes of clear membranes like a dragonfly's wings. They glowed softly.

"Jas, your wings ... they've—"

"—changed. Yeah, big deal," Jas muttered. She glared at Jedidiah. "We aren't underground at all, are we? You didn't tell me this would take us into another plane," she complained.

"We're in another plane?" Holly asked, awestruck.

"The borderland of the ethereal plane," Jedidiah explained. "One of the saurials, a wizard named Grypht, created the gates and the path. Do your wings transform every time you travel to a different plane?" the old priest asked Jas curiously.

"Yeah. Now can we get on with it?" Jas insisted.

The way was smooth, but the lack of scenery made the walk tiresome. After a while, Joel and Jedidiah began singing to break the monotony. Holly joined in occasionally. Jas remained silent, occupied with her own thoughts.

Joel asked Jedidiah if Alias knew the song to open the ethereal path.

"Oh, yes," the old priest said. "She has quite a remarkable voice."

"Is she a priestess of Finder?" Joel asked.

Jedidiah laughed and shook his head. "She's more like Jas. Avoids the gods if she can help it."

They lost all track of time during their trek in the murky grayness. They walked until they were exhausted, then rested. When they awoke, they ate another meal created by Jedidiah, then walked some more. Some time after their third rest, the path ended at another gate—a glittering yellow monolith of amber, engraved with Finder's symbol beneath the carving of an archway.

Joel repeated the marching song. This time he was the first to step through the gate.

He stood on another mountainside, just above the timberline, his back to another cliff engraved with Finder's symbol. The world below was already in twilight, the wooded slopes shadowed by the mountains to the west. Just down the path was a small open-sided shelter built of wood, shingled with slate to match the hillside.

When Jas popped out of the mountainside, her wings were once again pink feathers. Holly and Jedidiah came out a moment later.

"It's not far from here now," Jedidiah said, "but the trail is narrow and steep. We should wait until light to continue."

They walked down to the shelter. It was engraved with symbols of Finder, Tyr, Tymora, Chauntea, and others that Joel did not recognize. An assortment of wind chimes hung under the shelter's eaves—deep-toned tubes of copper, tinkling tinny silver bells, clacking reeds. Herbs and dried flowers hung from the ceiling. Benches surrounded a small round table. The high mountain air was chill, but the shelter was comfortably warmed by some enchantment. The party sat and ate one final meal of Jedidiah's magically created bread.

"Nothing personal, but I'll be glad to eat real food again," Jas said.

"So will I," Jedidiah agreed.

Assured by Jedidiah that there was no need to keep a watch as long as they slept in the safety of the shelter, they were all soon asleep on the wooden floor. The wind chimes in the eaves played a lullaby for the weary adventurers.

Joel woke before sunrise, when the birds were just beginning to stir. He lay awake, unable to fall back to sleep. Soon he would be in the Lost Vale, in the Singing Cave, the only temple to Finder. He would meet the temple's priestess, Copperbloom. Jedidiah had told Joel that if he made the pilgrimage to the Lost Vale he would understand more about Finder and his church. He wanted to believe Jedidiah with all his heart, yet Walinda's threat had poisoned that belief. What if he got there and still didn't understand his purpose, still felt useless? The uncertainty was unbearable.

The Rebel Bard sat up. Holly and Jas lay sleeping in a corner, but Jedidiah stood outside the shelter, motionless. Joel rose and joined him. Jedidiah smiled and whispered good morning.

"Trouble sleeping?" Joel asked.

"Just troubled period," Jedidiah replied. "Are you anxious to get there?" he asked.

Joel nodded with a sheepish grin. "It's kind of like the morning before Highharvestide. I'm too excited to sleep."

Jedidiah nodded with an understanding smile. "The sky's lightening," he noted. "Why don't you start down the path? I'll wait here until the ladies wake, then we'll follow you."

Joel looked down the trail eagerly, but then he turned back to Jedidiah and asked uncertainly, "Do you want me to go alone?"

"I only came north to be sure you escaped the priests of Xvim," Jedidiah explained.

"I wouldn't have made it here without you," Joel said, realizing that without Jedidiah's help, he would never have completed his pilgrimage.

Jedidiah shook his head. He put his hands on the young man's shoulders. "Joel, journeying to the Lost Vale isn't some

silly test of your survival skills. It's a measure of your desire to be part of Finder's church. It's a demonstration that you want to understand more about your god."

"And will I?" Joel asked in a whisper.

Jedidiah lowered his head, then raised it again. He wore a wry grin. "Maybe more than you were meant to," he replied. "This is going to be a trying time for our church and for our god."

"Because we lost the finder's stone?" Joel asked.

"No. Because I lost the finder's stone," Jedidiah corrected. He pointed down the path with one hand and slapped Joel on the back with the other hand. "Go," he ordered jovially. "Tell Copperbloom I'll be along later."

"I will," Joel said.

"Remember what I told you," Jedidiah said. "She can understand you just fine even if she can't speak our language."

Joel nodded as he began striding down the path. It curved around the mountain, leading downward.

The peaks of the surrounding mountains were still snow-covered, but the air grew warmer as he descended the peak. The boulders and low-growing junipers gave way to pine and spruce trees. Still farther down, stands of birch and aspen broke the solid line of evergreens. Below him, the path left the mountain slope and traveled along a saddle to the next slope. Rhododendrons bloomed in such profusion along the saddle that the land seemed to be covered by a purple haze.

Once he'd reached the saddle, Joel discovered side trails that branched off from the main path. He was nearing inhabited land. Far above him, something cried out, causing him to jump. Among the pine trees, Joel had seen and heard innumerable blue jays, but this cry was like none he'd ever heard. He looked up. Something circled high overhead, like a hawk, but its silhouette looked more like a giant bat than any bird.

When he had crossed the saddle, the path began winding around the next mountain, but now it began to climb the slope. On the southeastern face of the mountain, Joel got his first glimpse of the Lost Vale.

On the northern face of a mountain, across the vale, stood a stone tower. Innumerable small cottages, surrounded by gardens and fields, dotted the floor of the vale. Tiny figures moved about among the buildings; others headed into the mountains and hills.

A magnificent staircase climbed from the vale straight up the southern slope of the mountain on which the bard stood. Joel's path led through a rose garden to a landing midway up the staircase. The bard hurried forward until he stepped onto the landing. There he paused to take in the view.

The staircase was wide enough for eight men to walk abreast. On either side, amazing gardens clung to the slopes. The flowers and shrubbery and trees and vines sometimes grew over the stairs. Many of the plants were so exotic Joel could not even put a name to them. A stream trickled through the gardens, cascading over rocks. In one place, it flowed over the staircase, forcing the climber to use little stepping stones. Pieces of statuary, great and small, decorated the gardens. Some pieces represented wild creatures—frogs, birds, turtles, cats. Other carvings were more abstract in nature. Lanterns of stone, wood, metal, even glass, hung from trees or rested on boulders. After every sixteen steps, there was a landing. Each landing was decorated with huge banners hanging from tall posts. The banners were woven, embroidered, or painted with a design, some intricate, others simple and bold. A hundred chimes sounded with every breeze.

There could be no doubt in the mind of anyone climbing the staircase that it led to someplace special. Joel looked upward. Far above, he could just make out a black hole in the mountainside . . . the entrance to the Singing Cave. Above the entrance, Finder's symbol had been carved into

the mountain. To either side, huge banners of gray silk bearing the same harp symbol fluttered in the wind.

A figure stepped out of the gardens onto the landing just above Joel. The bard put his hand to the hilt of his sword, then, feeling rather foolish, he withdrew it. The figure had to be a saurial. A female, Joel assumed, because she carried a basket of flowers. She wore along white robe, but everything else about her was inhuman.

Though she walked on her hind legs, she leaned forward at her hips, balanced by the massive tail that swayed behind her. She was covered with tiny, pebbly scales in copper and green that made her hide look like very expensive beadwork. She had a long snout and sharp teeth, but no lips. Her eyes were yellow like a snake's. A shark-like fin rose from her brow and traversed the ridge of her head. She was much shorter than the bard.

Joel considered stepping off the stairs to hide, in order to savor his solitude a bit longer, but it was too late. The saurial had spotted him. She made a series of clicks with her tongue.

"Good day," Joel said, bowing low.

The saurial bowed back.

"I've come to see the temple," Joel said, feeling rather foolish, since his intent was obvious.

A vanilla scent rose from the creature. Jedidiah had once explained that saurials emitted a variety of odors that indicated their emotions. Joel wished he had thought to ask Jedidiah more about which emotions were indicated by which scents. The creature began trilling. At first Joel shifted nervously, since he couldn't understand her, but then he recognized she was singing the tune that had opened the magic gate to the ethereal borderland. Joel realized she was trying to ascertain how he'd gotten there.

Joel began singing along with her, his tenor voice blending well with her alto trilling. The music attracted other saurials. A mottled green and brown saurial a foot taller than

Joel, with razorlike plates running down its back and spikes on its tail, stepped out of the garden, and two little flyers, no bigger than halflings, with black, batlike wings, landed beside him. All three stood on the stairs to listen. Joel began to elaborate on the tune, finishing with a flourish.

The small audience applauded.

"Yes, I came by the gate," Joel said, answering what he presumed had been his fellow performer's question. "I'm Joel. Jedidiah of Finder sent me here on a pilgrimage."

The creature held her basket of flowers at arm's length, revealing Finder's symbol embroidered on her robe.

"You must be Copperbloom," he said.

The saurian nodded. She shooed the spectators away and motioned for the bard to accompany her up the stairs.

Joel climbed beside the priestess of Finder's temple. Since she did not speak, he remained silent at first. Then she tapped his arm and motioned to her ear. She wanted him to speak. Even if she couldn't question him, she could understand anything he had to say.

"Jedidiah's in the shelter at the end of the gate with two friends. He'll be coming later," Joel explained. "We've had some trouble getting here, but he'd better tell you about that."

Copperbloom motioned for Joel to talk about himself. The bard began telling about where he came from and his training at barding college, then related the details of his first meeting with Jedidiah.

By the time they'd reached the top of the staircase, Joel was out of breath, and his throat was parched from speaking. He felt foolish for having babbled so long about himself. Copperbloom led him into the Singing Cave. Just inside the cave entrance was a carpet of moss and ferns. Condensation made the walls sparkle. Little red and yellow skinks skittered about the floor, walls, and ceiling. Swallows shot in and out, hinging insects to their young in nests built in the cave's nooks and crannies.

'This is just the way it was when Finder arrived here with the party of adventurers that fought Meander, isn't it?" Joel asked.

Copperbloom made a circling motion indicating the cave entrance and nodded in response to Joel's question. Then she pointed to a passage leading deeper into the mountains and shook her head from side to side.

This is a new section?" Joel asked.

The saurian nodded and motioned for Joel to investigate. The passage was lit with light stones. Tapestries hung on the walls. One showed the enslavement of the saurials by the evil god Moander, another showed the battle that destroyed Moander's Realmsian body, and still another showed how Finder finally slew the abomination forever by killing it in its home plane, the Abyss.

The passage opened into a room full of musical instruments, some common to the Realms, others that Joel had never seen or heard of before. Two saurials similar to Copperbloom sat in this room, one playing a harp and the other a drum.

In the next room were several small saurials. Some stood very still, while others motioned broadly. Since he could not hear their speech, the scene looked very odd to Joel. At first he thought they might be practicing some sort of dance, but when one of them threw a bucket of confetti on another, he realized they were acting out a play. He laughed at the confetti, and the little saurials all turned and bowed.

There was a vast cavern beyond the children's theater. It was full of painted canvases, pottery, and sculpture too delicate for the outdoors.

Before Joel could explore it all or see what lay beyond, Copperbloom motioned for Joel to turn back. At the entrance of the cave, someone had laid out a breakfast of berries, milk, eggs, and ham. Copperbloom motioned for him to dine. Then she disappeared back down the passageway.

Joel felt like an overindulgent halfling when he finished the repast. When Copperbloom returned, she pointed to the birdpipes hanging from his belt and motioned for him to play.

Joel brought the instrument to his lips and began whistling out a tune. Copperbloom picked it up with her own trilling. They had just finished repeating the piece when more applause came from the cave entrance. Jedidiah stood there, smiling at the pair of them.

"I see you two are learning to communicate," the old priest said. "How are you, Copperbloom?"

The priestess rose and bowed very low. A series of clicks issued from the back of her throat, and Joel could smell the scent of woodsmoke issuing from her body.

Jedidiah motioned for the priestess to be seated again. He sat before the two of them.

"Where are Holly and Jas?" the Rebel Bard asked.

"Holly's in the garden. Grypht met us on the stairs,' the old priest said. "She's bending his ear about the advantages to the saurials of an alliance with Randal Morn and the Daggerfolk. Grypht is a powerful wizard," Jedidiah explained for Joel's benefit. He's sort of the unofficial leader here. Jas is soaring with the flying saurials."

"Is that safe?" Joel asked. "Isn't there a chance she'll be spotted by Walinda?"

"I warned her to stay lower than the mountain peak. The illusion that protects the vale reaches to the top of the mountains," Jedidiah replied. "Jas is a human woman with wings," he explained to Copperbloom.

Although Joel heard nothing, Copperbloom must have spoken, for Jedidiah sat listening to her, then shrugged. "No, she wouldn't tell me how she came to have wings," he answered the saurian priestess.

"How can you hear Copperbloom?" Joel asked.

"I can hear and understand the saurials and all the priests of Finder," Jedidiah explained. "It's a gift from Finder."

Copperbloom rose and went to the cave entrance. She looked down the staircase, then turned back to face her two human guests. Joel winced at the sound of a high-pitched noise, then he realized he was hearing, just barely, some of Copperbloom's speech.

Joel and Jedidiah joined Copperbloom at the entrance to the cave. Holly was just outside the entrance, speaking in hushed tones to a giant saurian, nearly ten feet tall and wearing a fur robe. From the staff the creature carried and the arcane magical symbols etched in the bony frill behind its head, Joel guessed the saurian to be Grypht, the powerful wizard and leader of the saurials.

"Joel, it's beautiful here," the paladin said. "I can see why you wanted to come."

"I am Grypht. Pleased to meet you, Joel of Finder," the saurian wizard said in perfectly recognizable common speech. Since the sounds he made didn't match the movement of his mouth, Joel guessed that the wizard had used magic to speak with him. Grypht turned to Copperbloom. "I bring a message from Sapphire the Finback. She asks if you will please come to bless her new egg before the end of day."

Copperbloom nodded.

"Meander destroyed so many of our young that every egg is precious to us," Grypht explained to Joel. "Each one is blessed by every priest and priestess we have."

The young saurials who had been rehearsing the play burst out from the temple, the flyers taking to the air, the others heading for the staircase. Copperbloom snagged one of the finheads by the shirt and pulled him toward her.

"This," Jedidiah said, "is Handful, Copperbloom's oldest hatchling. Well met, Handful," he addressed the young saurian.

The priestess made a clicking noise, and Handful bowed quickly to the group, then fidgeted in his mother's grip.

"He grows more like his father every day," Jedidiah noted.

Handful narrowed his eyes and looked up at the old priest. If the young saurial made a reply, Joel couldn't hear it.

"Yes, he does seem to share his father's immunity to your charms," Grypht said to Jedidiah.

Jedidiah winked at Handful. Copperbloom released her son. The boy made another, much more formal, bow, which Joel sensed was more saucy than reverent. Then the young saurial dashed into the gardens and was soon lost from sight.

"I was wondering if you would show Holly down to the village," Jedidiah asked Grypht. "I have some church business to discuss with Joel and Copperbloom."

Holly descended the stairs with the saurial wizard, and Jedidiah motioned for Joel and Copperbloom to follow him back into the Singing Cave.

The three priests sat on the moss and ferns, and Jedidiah instructed Joel to describe his adventures since arriving in Daggerdale. Joel related his encounters with the Zhentilar, Holly, Randal Morn, Bear, the Xvimists, Walinda, and Jas. He told how he, Holly, and Jas were hunted across Daggerdale and how Jedidiah had rescued them in Giant's Claw Valley.

Then Jedidiah explained why he had put some of his power into his half of the finder's stone. Copperbloom chirped, and a scent like baked ham rose from her body.

"Yes, I know I could have just left them, but I wanted to stay with Joel," Jedidiah replied to the saurial priestess.

Copperbloom chirped something else.

"Of course he can take care of himself," Jedidiah retorted. "I just—I wanted—" Jedidiah hesitated then sighed. "I wanted the chance to go adventuring again," he admitted.

Copperbloom looked up at the ceiling, shaking her head slowly back and forth.

"That's not the worst part," Jedidiah said.

Copperbloom leaned forward with her eyes fixed rigidly on the older priest. Jedidiah reported quickly and matter-of-

factly how Walinda had stolen the finder's stone. Copperbloom gestured wildly with her hands, making a series of whistling noises, which Jedidiah listened to with a grim look. Then Jedidiah told her of the banelich and the old priest's agreement to find the

Hand of Bane in exchange for the finder's stone. Copperbloom put her head in her hands and moaned.

"I was stupid and reckless, I know," Jedidiah said to the priestess. "But there's nothing to be done about it. I have no choice. I have to find the Hand of Bane so I have something to bargain with. It's somewhere in Sigil."

Copperbloom trilled something, and the smell of baked bread rose from her body.

"Yes, that's exactly what I want," Jedidiah said. "Would you please bring it to me?"

Copperbloom huffed. She rose to her feet and retreated down the hallway toward the other caverns, shaking her head and making disturbed clicking noises.

"She doesn't look pleased," Joel noted. "She reminds me of how my mom used to act when I did something dumb."

"Ever since she became a mother she treats me like a child," Jedidiah said. "Actually, come to think of it, most of the women in my life treat me like a child. I suppose I deserve it."

Copperbloom returned a few minutes later with a large blue-glazed porcelain bowl decorated with a harp, a glaur, and a songhorn, all entwined in green vines laden with yellow blossoms. She set the bowl down before Jedidiah and bowed low.

"Thank you," Jedidiah said.

The bowl was filled with pure white sand. Jedidiah brushed the sand aside until he uncovered a glimmer of yellow. Gently he loosened what was buried in the sand and pulled it out.

Joel gasped. "It's the finder's stone!"

"Half of the finder's stone," Jedidiah corrected.

The stone the old priest held was the mirror image of the stone Joel had seen Jedidiah use to siphon off his power—a rounded, multifaceted yellow gemstone with a jagged bottom.

"This," Jedidiah said, blowing sand from the stone, "is the half of the stone Finder left in the vale with Alias and the saurials before he went into the Abyss to find the mage Akabar bel Akash. It hasn't left the vale since then—nearly ten years ago."

"I thought Finder went into the Abyss to kill Moander," Joel said.

Jedidiah shook his head. "That wasn't his original intention, but Akabar sacrificed his own life to convince Finder to kill Moander."

Suddenly Joel came to another realization. "If that's the half of the finder's stone that Finder left the saurials, then the half you had was ..." Joel let his voice trail off.

"... the half that Finder took with him to the Abyss," Jedidiah said with a nod.

Joel's eyes widened. "You had Finder's half of the stone? How did you get it?" he asked, his voice low with wonder. "Did Finder give it to you?" he asked.

"Not precisely," Jedidiah said. He sang a scale, then another in a different key. The half of the finder's stone glowed brightly and cast a beam of golden light on Jedidiah. As it did, the old priest began to transform. His back grew straighter; his skin became unwrinkled; his muscles hardened; his hair darkened to black, with only a few splotches of gray. His features still looked like Jedidiah, but the signs of his age had evaporated, and youthful vitality flowed through his body.

When the transformation had ceased, Jedidiah turned to Joel. "You see," he said with a sheepish expression on his face, "I had Finder's half of the stone because I carried it with me into the Abyss. It was my half of the stone. I'm Finder, your god."

Eleven
Finder

Joel's jaw dropped. He stared wordlessly at Jedidiah for a full twenty heartbeats, while his mind struggled to form a coherent reply. Finally he said, "I don't believe it," then instantly felt foolish.

"I'm afraid it's true," Jedidiah replied. "May I strike myself with lightning if it's not," he joked. Excitement gripped Joel's heart. Here he was, speaking with a god, the god he'd agreed to serve. Suddenly he was nervous. "Um, is there some special way I should address you? Should I kneel or bow, or anything? I've never met a god before," he said.

Jedidiah shook his head. "No. My ego's large, but despite what my detractors say, it's not that large. I'm not really comfortable with adulation. I'm just a little god. You can keep calling me Jedidiah. I've gotten rather attached to the name."

Joel grinned. The fears Walinda had tried to use to cloud his judgment evaporated. He was really talking with Finder. Then a new worry niggled at his heart. "If you're Finder, then what happened to Jedidiah?" he asked. "Jedidiah is me, or I'm Jedidiah. It's a disguise I wear when I travel around the Realms."

"Then that was you in Berdusk?" Joel asked. "When you were telling me about Finder, you were telling me about yourself?"

Jedidiah nodded.

Joel let out his breath. He thought he'd been asked to join Finder's church by a charming old bard-priest, when all along it was Finder himself. "Why me?" he asked.

"Why did I ask you to be a priest?" Jedidiah inquired.

Joel nodded.

"Well, I wanted to get the best people I could find-people who already believed strongly in transforming art. I'd

watched you in Berdusk, arguing with your teachers, trying to break the constraints of traditional music. You already understood what it took me centuries to understand. Also, you were well rounded, took an interest in everything. You reminded me a little of myself when I was younger, except you're modest."

"But why all the special attention? Why did you follow me? Didn't you think I could make it here on my own?" Joel asked. He felt like a failure, since he knew he would have died without Jedidiah's help.

"As I told you earlier, the journey wasn't a test to see if you could get here on your own. It was a measure of your desire to be part of my church. And I didn't actually follow you. One of my godly abilities is always knowing what's happening to any of my priests," Jedidiah explained. "I heard you call for my blessing in Daggerdale, but you took care of the Zhents without needing of my help. I considered stepping in when Bear betrayed you to the Xvimists, but Xvim keeps an eye on his priests, too. If I interfered with one of them, Xvim would interfere with me. I needed to be more subtle in my efforts to help you escape. I don't dare risk attracting Xvim's attention. To put it bluntly, Bear's god can beat up your god. When you were imprisoned in the

Temple in the Sky and called on me, I sent you the vision and a piece of magic, but you escaped, with your friend, on your own."

Jedidiah sighed. "I haven't been a god all that long. I still long for mortal things sometimes. As I explained to Copperbloom," he said, "I only began to travel with you because I got caught up in the adventure. I wanted to find out what a priestess of Bane was doing with a spelljammer. I wanted to watch you thwart the Xvimists. I wanted to be part of your journey. If I hadn't been such a fool, if I'd just returned to the Lost Vale after you escaped, the dark stalker would have lost you and you would have been just fine."

"But why all the special attention?" Joel asked again. "You must have better things to do with your time."

"Joel," Jedidiah said softly, "you're my priest. You are my strength. I told you that before."

"What about your other priests?" Joel asked.

Jedidiah looked up at Copperbloom. A vanilla scent rose from the saurial priestess as she clicked with what Joel was sure was laughter.

This is it," Jedidiah said, making a circling motion with his finger to indicate the occupants of the room. "You, me, Copperbloom. This is my only temple—so far. There are several little shrines, most of them set up by people you spoke to on your journey here. More than a few artists have seen fit to evoke my name, giving me a little more power. It's going to take some years, though, before our church gets much larger. For one thing, we have to proceed with caution. There are some gods, far more powerful than I, who don't like the competition I represent."

"Like Oghma and Milil," Joel guessed.

Jedidiah nodded. "The Lord of Knowledge and the Lord of Song are afraid I'll be poaching bards and artists away from their following. There's also the power I took from Moander. I have some control over the cycle of life—growth, rot, and rebirth. Chauntea, the Great Mother, and Lathander, the Morninglord, are both involved in rebirth and growth. Which leaves me control over rot—not something most people have a tremendous attraction to, unless you happen to be a former worshiper of Moander."

"So what will you do?" Joel asked.

"Well, I still plan to work with everything over which I've been given dominion," Jedidiah said. "But I need to proceed carefully. I need to build a strong framework for my church—one that other churches can't bring down easily. That's why I've searched out and set up two very strong supports." Jedidiah indicated Joel and Copperbloom with his hands.

Joel bowed his head humbly. Then he looked back up at Jedidiah. "Why didn't you tell me all this in Berdusk?" he asked. "Why the disguise as an old priest?"

"There's lots of reasons for the disguise. I can't really hide from other gods, but at least I can try not to attract their attention, or the attention of their churches. Also, I don't want a lot of people around me vying for my attention while I'm trying to get things done."

"But why didn't you tell me until now?" Joel asked, feeling cheated that he'd been left out of the secret. "Copperbloom knew, didn't she?"

"Copperbloom is a special case," Jedidiah explained. "I spent my first few years as a god roaming the planes, savoring my freedom and immortality. Copperbloom was one of my first worshipers. She called me to the Realms, pointed out that I had responsibilities to the few followers I did have. Without her encouragement and pestering, there would be no church of Finder. As for telling you, I just did."

"But you let me think you were someone else for a year," Joel complained, still feeling left out.

"Well, that's another one of those mortal things I still long for sometimes," Jedidiah said.

"What?" Joel asked, confused.

"Friendship," the god replied.

Joel lowered his eye, feeling ungracious.

"I genuinely enjoyed your company, our talks, our debates," Jedidiah explained. "I didn't want to spoil things by telling you my true identity right away. It would have changed our relationship. I should have told you as soon as I found out about the dark stalker sniffing out my power. Then you wouldn't have worried about me. But I was bitten by the adventuring bug, and I was happy traveling with a friend. So I came up with the half-cracked scheme of hiding most of my power in my half of the finder's stone, knowing full well how vulnerable it would make me."

"And the banelich discovered that vulnerability," Joel noted, "and intends to exploit it."

"Yes," Jedidiah replied with chagrin. "I should have teleported here to siphon off my power into the saurial's half of the finder's stone, then had Grypht teleport me back, but I got cocky. I sensed the banelich was approaching, but I thought I would be a match for it, even without most of my power. Unfortunately, the power I put in the stone included my godly ability to know everything that was going on around me. I could no longer sense the banelich's presence. I couldn't even sense Walinda when she picked my pockets. It never occurred to me that anyone could steal the stone so easily. I'm just too reckless sometimes." He looked down at his hands and sighed. Then he looked up with a foolish grin and asked, "How does it feel to discover that your god is a fool?"

Joel couldn't think of a fitting reply. Instead, he asked, "Isn't there some way to retrieve your half of the finder's stone from the banelich without handing over the Hand of Bane?" Jedidiah shook his head, but Joel argued on, irritated that the idea was being dismissed so quickly, "But you're a god. He's just the essence of a god."

"I'm still immortal and very strong. I can cast some simple spells. To a mortal, I may seem powerful, but to a banelich ... we may just be evenly matched. And even if I could defeat the banelich in combat, I couldn't prevent it from breaking the stolen half of the finder's stone and destroying all the power within it."

"What about other gods?" Joel asked. "Wouldn't any of them help you?"

Jedidiah snorted derisively. "The other gods would be just as likely to take the power I stored in the finder's stone for themselves."

"Even Tymora? You said that she was Finder's—I mean your—ally."

Jedidiah said nothing for a moment, then muttered, "I really don't want to ask her. Not yet, at any rate."

Joel was about to ask, "Why not?" when it occurred to him that Jedidiah was embarrassed. He didn't want to lose face before the goddess by admitting how foolish he'd been.

"Besides, that still doesn't solve the problem that the banelich might break the stone if he's confronted," Jedidiah added.

Joel sighed. "Do you—" he began, then hesitated.

"Do I what?" Jedidiah asked. "Ask whatever you want. Please."

Nervously, for he was uncertain what the god's reaction might be, Joel asked, "Do you really need the power in the stone?"

"When I put my power into the other half of the finder's stone," Jedidiah explained, "I lost more of my godly abilities than I intended—my ability to sense what's going on around me, and around my priests, my ability to teleport and to cast powerful magic. I wasn't even able to shapeshift to my real form until I took back the little bit of the power I left in this stone." Jedidiah held up the saurial's half of the finder's stone. "If my church grows, I'll gain power from my worshipers and gain back some of those abilities, but that will take time."

"How much time?" Joel asked.

"A long time. Centuries, I suspect. You see, in order to gain power from my mortal followers, I have to give power to them, but I don't really have that much to give. I have just enough right now to grant you and Copperbloom some simple priestly spells—if I concentrate hard. I'm not even sure I could actually handle any more priests just now. So it will be kind of hard for the church to grow."

Joel sat quietly for a few moments, examining his feelings. He was pleased his god saw fit to trust him with plans and secrets. He wasn't even too upset about being deceived for so long. Since he'd become a priest, he had

hoped he would have a chance to prove himself worthy of the honor Jedidiah had bestowed upon him, and now the opportunity had presented itself. He was uncertain, however, about having anything to do with retrieving the Hand of Bane for Walinda and the banelich. Yet his god needed his help now more than ever.

He looked up at Jedidiah's face. "I'll do everything in my power to help you get your stone back," he said.

Jedidiah smiled with relief. "I appreciate it," he said. "I have a feeling I'm going to need your help where we're going." Jedidiah slapped his hands on his knees. "Well, now that that's been taken care of, I think we're entitled to a break. Shall we join your friends?"

"Are you going to remain in your present form?" Joel asked.

"Yes. It's a little handier should we get into any physical combat. I'll tell Holly and Jas I'm traveling to the Outlands in disguise to avoid my enemies there. The saurials don't really care. They've seen me in both forms."

Copperbloom remained behind in the temple as Joel and Jedidiah descended the mountain to the saurial village.

"This staircase and the gardens are really amazing," Joel said. "Clearing the trees from the slope alone must have been a huge project. Did you have something to do with its creation?" he asked.

Jedidiah shook his head. "This is the path Moander cleared when he climbed the hill to reach my friends

hiding in the Singing Cave. Something about the way the abomination moved carved out the steps, which the saurials then paved with stone. The part that took the most work was hauling all this dirt up the mountain in order to plant the gardens. The exotic plants are from the saurials' home world. Grypht made a trip there and brought them back."

They found Holly engaging in stick combat with Handful in front of a cottage. Joel explained to Holly why Jedidiah's appearance was altered. The paladin studied Jedidiah for a

few moments, then nodded in acceptance of the old priest's new younger look.

The odor of vanilla wafted in the air, and the young saurial chittered. Joel realized he was laughing at the story of Jedidiah being disguised to thwart his enemies.

Jedidiah gave Handful a half-threatening, half-amused glower. "Very funny," he said. "Why don't you fetch some lunch for our guests?" he suggested.

Handful slipped off into the cottage.

"What did he say?" Holly asked curiously.

"He suggested I disguise myself as the god Lathander instead."

Holly's brow furrowed. "I don't understand."

"It's a stupid little-boy joke," Jedidiah replied. "I'll see you two later. Enjoy your meal."

"Where's Jas?" Joel asked.

"She's still up there with the flying saurials," Holly said, pointing up at a mountain peak. Joel could just make out a pink spot flying in formation with several black dots.

Handful returned with a tray of food and drink, consisting of fresh fruit and vegetables, venison sausage, a dish of heavily spiced ground wheat, and hot tea. They ate seated on tree stumps in the cottage garden. A short time later Jas landed. Her face was flushed and she was smiling broadly.

Once again Joel explained that Jedidiah was in disguise to avoid his enemies in the Outlands.

"You sure you weren't in disguise before to avoid your enemies in the Realms, and this is how you really look?" Jas asked Jedidiah, a sly grin on her face.

Jedidiah grinned back at the winged woman. "Don't you think I'd prefer to convince people I was a much younger man with such a beautiful and clever young woman present?" he asked.

Jas flushed and turned her attention to the meal. Locustlike, she polished off all the remaining food before lying down in the sun for a nap.

"She looks happy for a change," Joel noted.

Holly shrugged. "She's found an activity to temporarily take her mind off the death of her friends," the paladin said. "It will be a long time before she's at peace, let alone happy."

Joel looked down into his teacup, feeling insensitive. Holly, he realized, was speaking from her own experience of losing her family to the Zhents.

Handful tugged Holly off to show the young paladin around the vale. Jedidiah sat with Joel in the garden, telling him tales about the saurials and the death of Moander.

That evening the saurials held a feast for their guests. They served roasted boar and good, strong ale. Jedidiah and Joel were called upon to sing and play. Joel was asked to tell the tale of his journey north. Holly sang a Daggerdale haying song. Prompted by the flying saurials, even Jas sang a strange song about traveling between the spheres that not even Jedidiah had heard before. The saurials sang, too. It was eerie watching the saurials listen to sounds the humans couldn't hear, but Grypht and Jedidiah translated the words. The saurials also played musical instruments, but these the humans could hear. Copperbloom and two of her students accompanied Joel on several tunes. The young saurials performed a skit, the play Joel had watched them rehearse in the temple. It was about a pact the tribe had once made with a dragon back on their home world. It was past midnight when the saurials finally began drifting homeward and released their guests from the celebration. Copperbloom led Jas and Holly off, and Handful showed Joel and Jedidiah to a small cottage. Joel pulled off his boots and flopped down on one of the two beds with a sigh of genuine pleasure. It was the first real bed he'd been in since Anathar's Dell, and he expected the night to be just as restful.

Jedidiah lay on the bed across the room. He was soon snoring softly. Apparently, without the majority of his godly

power to sustain him, the efforts of the past few days had exhausted him as it would any human.

Despite the amusements of the evening, all the ale he'd had to drink, and the softness of the feather bed, Joel had trouble drifting off to sleep. He couldn't help thinking about Walinda, the banelich, and the consequences of handing over the Hand of Bane to them. Although Jedidiah had invited Joel to ask him any question, the young bard had kept one in reserve. Now the question rustled through his brain like a serpent slithering through dried leaves.

Wouldn't it be better, he thought, just to forget the power in the finder's stone? Was the power so important to Jedidiah that he was prepared to assist in the resurrection of so evil a god as Bane, earning the enmity of all good people in the Realms? If Jedidiah would forgo the power rather than aid Bane's followers, he would still have his immortality, without forfeiting any of the love and respect Joel and many of the saurials obviously felt for him. Of course, Joel realized, Copperbloom might not see it that way. She had been instrumental in getting Finder to start his church, and the power in the stolen finder's stone would help that church to grow.

Wishing he had the courage to ask Jedidiah these questions, the bard finally fell into a restless sleep.

Late the next morning, after a large brunch, Jas took again to air to soar with the flyers. Holly set out with Handful to visit a shrine to Lathander in the mountains to the east of the vale. When both women had gone, Jedidiah led Joel back up to the Singing Cave. There the god taught his follower how to call on him for several other magical spells. First they worked on the spells Joel had witnessed in the past few days: a spell to heat metal and a command spell like the ones Walinda had used on Jas, faerie fire like the one cast on the stone marking the entrance to Giant's Craw Valley, and a spell to create food and water the way Jedidiah had done during their journey through the mountains. Jedidiah threw

in a spell to locate objects, in case, the god joked, Joel mislaid his birdpipes again.

"Why are the forms so rigid?" Joel asked while he was struggling with the wording of the prayer to locate objects.

"If it comes in the right form," Jedidiah explained, "the power siphons from me without my having to think about it. That way I can keep concentrating on whatever I'm doing when you call for the spell. If you called for something with the wrong wording, I'd have to stop and think about it for a moment. For a god with hundreds of priests, that could get pretty complicated, and he may well end up ignoring them."

"If you were watching me and concentrating, could you grant me something I hadn't learned?" Joel asked.

"It sounds possible," Jedidiah said. "But I'm not sure what the consequences might be. I think that's an experiment we should table for a while."

There was a commotion outside the temple, and Joel heard the sound of saurials twittering. Copperbloom came in and said something to Jedidiah that Joel couldn't hear.

"Let's go see," Jedidiah murmured.

Joel followed his god out of the Singing Cave. In the garden, saurials were watching the sky intently. Joel and Jedidiah looked up.

A few saurial flyers circled the vale lazily. At the party the previous night, Jas had told Joel that most of the flyers hunted for small creatures and birds, but some were scouts on watch for approaching outsiders. Jedidiah pointed to the east. High over the mountain peaks at the eastern edge of the vale flew the spelljammer temple to Bane. The ship flew southward, beyond the southern peaks of the vale, then turned back to the east.

"A square spiral search pattern," Jedidiah said. "Very methodical, your Walinda. I guess she took me literally when I told her she could try to search for the vale."

"But she hasn't seen past the illusion," Joel noted. "Did you cast the spell?" he asked.

Jedidiah shook his head. "That magic was here before I was even born."

"What does it look like from up there?" Joel asked.

"As if the vale is rocky and barren," Jedidiah replied.

"Suppose they fly lower?" he asked.

"They can try," Jedidiah muttered with a sly grin. "Now, what's that?" he asked suddenly, pointing to a speck flying behind the spelljammer.

Joel shrugged. "I can hardly see it."

Jas landed beside the two men. "Did you see?" she asked angrily, whatever calm she achieved disturbed by the sight of her stolen craft.

Jedidiah nodded. "Jas, if you please, would you fly up and ask one of the flyers to see if she can tell what that speck is that's following the ship?"

The winged woman nodded.

Jedidiah held her back for a moment. "Don't try to follow it yourself," he warned. "If they spot a flying saurian, they might mistake it for a bird, but you, on the other hand ..."

"Yeah, I know. I stand out like a festhall girl at a funeral," Jas said. She took to the sky, heading to intercept one of the saurian flyers to the east.

"Why are they looking for us?" Joel asked. "We said we'd meet them."

"Because a valeful of hostage saurials would be even more leverage for the banelich to use to ensure I brought him the Hand of Bane," Jedidiah said. "In case the finder's stone isn't enough, or in case he wants to keep the finder's stone for himself."

Jedidiah motioned for Joel to follow him back into the temple. When they'd once more settled in the Singing Cave, the god began to teach Joel a new song. It was an unusual piece of music. The lyrics were about a tulip's cycle of life, and the tune switched from a major chord to a minor halfway through.

Joel couldn't really think of any occasion when he would want to sing the song, and he had trouble committing it to memory. His mind kept straying to thoughts of Bane and Jedidiah's agreement to help the banelich.

After Joel's third failed attempt to master the fourth verse of the song, Jedidiah called a halt to the work. "Let's get some air," he suggested.

They strolled through the gardens side by side for several minutes without speaking. Finally Jedidiah asked, "Why don't you tell me what's on your mind?"

Joel took a deep breath. All in a rush, he spoke of all the worries that had dogged his sleep the night before. When he finished, he looked down at the flowers, unable to meet Jedidiah's unwavering gaze.

Jedidiah sighed. "Yes," he said. "I could forget the finder's stone. I know several acquaintances who would tell me that was the proper course. Of course, it would also be the fool's course," he said.

Joel flushed with anger, and he found the courage to look back up at his god.

"Joel, think of the consequences of that action. Do you think Walinda and the banelich will abandon their quest because I choose not to help them?"

A new blush rose to Joel's face, this one of embarrassment. "No," he admitted softly, feeling like a complete idiot.

"Naturally my help will make the quest easier for Walinda," Jedidiah said, "saving her a great deal of time and keeping her from a good deal of danger. If she were lost, the banelich would have to find another worshiper of Bane capable of succeeding her, which wouldn't be easy."

Joel looked startled. "You weren't thinking of—"

"Killing Walinda?" Jedidiah finished Joel's question, "Not really. I'm trying to avoid making the banelich angry. Remember, I don't want to risk him crushing the finder's stone under his armored foot just to get even with me.

Besides it would only delay the inevitable. He's going to get someone to retrieve the Hand of Bane regardless. I want it to be us. It gives us time to learn more about him and Walinda, their weaknesses and strengths. It gives us leverage. It gives us options. I'm not sure which option I'll choose, but I want to have them."

Joel nodded in agreement. "I'm sorry," he said.

"For what?" Jedidiah asked. "Being a good person with the courage to question a god? That's one of the reasons I chose you for a priest. Of course," Jedidiah added, his eyes twinkling with mischief, "this is the point where my good friend Olive Ruskettle would point out that I always have some justification for my actions, whether I'm right or wrong."

Jas landed beside them in the garden. "You'll never guess," she said excitedly.

"What?" Joel asked.

"The figure following the spelljammer," the winged woman said. "The flyers said it's a human, all deformed by magic so that it's arms have become wings. Guess what it's wearing?"

Joel shook his head, completely clueless.

"An eye patch," Jas announced.

Joel gasped. "Bear?" he asked incredulously.

"That would be my guess," the winged woman replied.

"Now he's chasing the banelich's power," Jedidiah said with a grin.

"Go get 'em, Bear," Jas said. She flew off toward the village.

Joel looked at Jedidiah. "What do you think? Can Bear hurt them?"

"He can certainly annoy them," Jedidiah replied, then changed the subject. "Do you think you're ready to try that song again now?" he asked.

Joel nodded. "Does the song have a purpose?" he asked.

"It might," Jedidiah answered, "but I'd rather explain that later, after you've learned it."

It still took a lot of work, but by dinner Joel had mastered Jedidiah's song. The god put off explaining the purpose of the song for another day. Joel accepted the delay.

Dinner that night was a simple affair, a buffet in Grypht's stone tower with only the wizard and the humans attending.

When they'd all finished eating, they began discussing their plans for the next day. Grypht didn't cast any magic to enable him to speak with the guests. Instead, he listened quietly and attentively as they talked. On the table before Joel, Jedidiah spread out a map of the Desertsouth Mountains and the Anauroch Desert. A collection of X's, drawn like bones, dotted the map.

Holly and Jas leaned over the table to get a better look.

"These were the locations of the cities of the dead empire of Netheril," Jedidiah explained to Joel. "Not all its wizards together could block the encroaching sand that eventually buried it. There's nothing left but ruins inhabited by desert nomads and an occasional ancient dark monster. We are here," the older priest said, pointing to an unmarked spot on the map.

Jedidiah jabbed a finger at one of the X's. "This is Cat's Gate. It's large enough to march an army through. It leads to the Plane of Concordant Opposition, otherwise known as the Outlands. Grypht will teleport Joel and me there." "I want to come with you," Holly said matter-of-factly,

Jedidiah shook his head. "I can't imagine either the banelich or Walinda will welcome you back aboard," he pointed out.

"But if you insist on my coming," Holly said sweetly, "I'm sure you can talk them into it."

"Don't you dare!" Jas warned, waving a finger at Jedidiah. "This is too dangerous for her, and you know it!"

Joel agreed completely with the winged woman, but he tried a different tack on the paladin. "Holly, their god is an

enemy of your god. They're going to know you plan to thwart them," the Rebel Bard pointed out. "Jedidiah and I, though, have no choice but to help them. We can't allow you to disrupt our plan."

"On the other hand," Holly argued, "you don't really want to help them. If there's any chance of getting Jedidiah's stone back without helping Bane's church, I'm going to find it and make sure you take it. Besides," the girl added, "you can't afford to trust Walinda and the banelich. They'll betray you the first chance they get. Then you'll really need my help."

Jedidiah studied the girl with a grim smile. "Very well, paladin," he said. "I cannot guarantee the banelich will accept you into the party, but I will do my best to convince it that we need your help to find the hand. In turn, you must promise not to try anything rash... at least not without consulting with me first."

Holly grinned and nodded.

Jas threw her hands up. "Has everyone here taken leave of his senses?" she growled.

Joel shifted uncomfortably. He wanted to argue with Jedidiah about bringing Holly, but not in front of the others.

"I take it you haven't changed your mind since we talked on the spelljammer. Your goal is still Waterdeep?" Jedidiah asked Jas.

"You bet," the winged woman replied. "Other spelljammers land in Waterdeep. I've got plenty of experience. I won't have any trouble getting one to take me on as crew. I'd prefer to have my own ship back, but under the circumstances, I think I'd be better off cutting my losses. Just as soon as I see you three off tomorrow, I'm going to take up Grypht's generous offer to teleport me to Waterdeep."

Grypht nodded to Jas.

As he rolled his map up, Jedidiah addressed the saurian wizard. "We'll meet you in the temple tomorrow morning."

Back in the privacy of the cottage that he shared with Jedidiah, Joel confronted the god with his concern for the paladin. "How can you let Holly come along? She's in far greater danger from Walinda and the banelich than we are. They may despise us, but they hate her."

"I imagine Holly feels you are in far more danger because Walinda has taken a liking to you," Jedidiah replied.

Joel huffed. "This isn't her problem," he said. "How can you allow her to take such a risk on our behalf?"

"Joel, she's used to taking risks, especially on behalf of her god. No doubt she feels she can serve Lathander if she comes with us. She's a sensible girl, with a sensible attitude. If the banelich agrees to her presence, she can serve as a distraction, maybe even a big enough distraction to give us a chance to get the stone back."

"You're using her as a decoy?"

"The Hand of Bane is the decoy. Holly is the stalking horse," Jedidiah corrected.

"What if we find no other way of getting the stone back? Holly is never going to allow us to give Walinda the Hand of Bane."

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," Jedidiah replied. "Or burn it once we've crossed it." He sat on his bed and pulled off his boots. "Have a little faith, priest," he teased.

Once again Joel lay awake far into the night wondering about his god. Jedidiah had proven himself foolish

enough to lose most of his godly power. Now he was preparing to use the young paladin in a deadly game against the church of Bane. The fact that Holly was willing to be used didn't ease Joel's mind any.

The young priest also couldn't stop worrying what would happen if they recovered the Hand of Bane and Jedidiah did hand it over to the banelich. Bane would be resurrected once more to plague the Realms. Or worse, what would happen if the banelich took the Hand of Bane and then

found a way to betray them and keep the finder's stone? As weak as Jedidiah was, not only would Joel's and Holly's lives be at stake, but Jedidiah himself could end up taking Bane's place in the astral plane as a floating immortal corpse.

When sleep finally came to the Rebel Bard, his dreams were filled with barren deserts and blood-red sunsets.

Twelve Cat's Gate

The next morning Joel and Jedidiah climbed the stairs to the Singing Cave together, lugging heavy backpacks filled with supplies. Copperbloom had seen to their provisioning as efficiently as a quartermaster from the Cormyrean army. She'd provided them with all they needed: food, water, tarps, blankets, fresh clothing, potions, even new scabbards for their weapons. Holly was already waiting at the entrance to the temple. Her face was drawn, her eyes bloodshot. She probably stayed up late speaking with Jas, and of course she would have been up at sunrise to pray to her god before she set off on her quest.

"I need to speak with Copperbloom in private," Jedidiah told Joel. "Call me when Grypht arrives, please."

Joel nodded and Jedidiah disappeared into the temple.

"Where's Jas?" he asked Holly.

"She gone off with the flyers," the paladin said. "She said she didn't want to see us off. She asked me to bid you farewell."

The news left Joel feeling disheartened. He might never see the winged woman again, and he had at least hoped to wish her well.

Grypht arrived a short time later. Once again he'd taken the trouble to cast a spell so he could speak their language. He wished them good morning, then spoke to Joel. "In case you had not noticed, your Jedidiah can be very reckless and thoughtless."

Joel flushed, unable to bring himself to gainsay the saurial wizard's analysis of his god. Grypht knew Jedidiah far better than he, and Joel had already reached the same conclusion.

"Any time you can influence him to show moderation or consideration, I advise you to do so," Grypht said.

Joel nodded, then went to fetch Jedidiah.

Copperbloom accompanied her god and her fellow priest out of the Singing Cave. She embraced Holly, then Joel. Her scales were warm and smooth to the touch, and the scent of honeysuckle rose from her throat. The priestess bowed very low before her god.

Jedidiah returned her bow with one of his own, then turned to Grypht. "We're ready," he said.

"Are you sure you want to go this early?" the wizard asked. "They are not expecting you for another day. They may not even arrive there themselves until tomorrow."

"I want to be there before they arrive, to check the lay of the land," Jedidiah explained, "in case they were considering some trick before we enter the Outlands, Check on Cat's Gate tomorrow evening, just in case we have to leave Holly behind."

"Or in case they do not show up?" Grypht asked hopefully.

"That's not likely," the god replied. "In that event, we will head for Sigil without them. If the Hand of Bane is ours, they will come to us."

Grypht nodded, then turned away from the others.

From the growls and clicks, Joel guessed that the wizard had begun an incantation in his own tongue. The smell of fresh-mown hay surrounded the huge saurial. The tip of his staff began to sparkle, and with it the wizard traced a door-sized ellipse in the air. The yellow-white sparks hung suspended by magic.

Light flared in the ellipse, and a blast of very hot, very dry air shot out from within. Inside the sparkling border,

there appeared a wasteland of sand.

"You can step through now," Grypht said.

Jedidiah picked up a knapsack and jumped through the magical portal. They could see him sliding in the sand on the other side.

Joel grabbed the other knapsack and stepped through more carefully. He stood on the top of a huge sand dune. The air was scorching and completely still. It shimmered all about him. The morning sun was blinding. To the east, the Desertsouth Mountains were a purple haze. The dunes reached every other horizon.

The bard turned back to watch for Holly. In the ellipse, he saw the paladin hug the saurian wizard. A moment later she dropped through the portal and tumbled down the sand dune past Joel until she came to rest beside Jedidiah in a hollow on the side of the sand dune. Back in the Lost Vale, Grypht motioned with his staff, and the ellipse blinked out.

Joel slid down the slope on his backside until he reached the old priest and the paladin. He stood up and shook the sand from his clothing.

Below the dune on which they stood, two monuments of worn stone poked out from the sand, rising some fifty feet in the air. Three sides of each monument rose vertically, but the fourth, outer side inclined like a pyramid. The monuments stood about fifty feet apart, with their inner sides parallel to one another. Their surfaces were covered with huge bas-reliefs of great cats—lions, tigers, leopards, panthers.

"Behold the pillars of Cat's Gate," Jedidiah said, motioning to the two stone towers. "Or rather, the tops of the pillars of Cat's Gate. The majority of the gate is

buried in the sand. According to old texts, the pillars rose higher than the Flaming Tower. When the kingdom of Netheril was in flower, there was a floating citadel here, one that made the Temple in the Sky look like a pebble. The wizards who built the gate commanded a strip of land along

the Desertsouth Mountains five hundred miles long and a hundred miles across. The Lost Vale was one of their outlying colonies. Not satisfied with what they had, the wizards set their sights on the Outlands. They bore into that plane with their magic, built the pillars to hold open the gate, then marched their armies through to conquer the lands beyond in their name."

"What happened?" Holly asked, shielding her eyes with her hand to observe the pillars.

"Other beings, more powerful than the wizards, marched their armies out of the gate into Netheril to conquer it in their name," Jedidiah replied. After a century or so of warfare, the encroaching desert sand became a blessing—covering the surrounding city, making the land useless to conquering armies, and sealing the gate from detection on either side."

"If the pillars are taller than the Flaming Tower, it's going to take a lot of digging to clear them. They must be buried under fifty feet of sand," Joel estimated.

"More like a hundred feet," Jedidiah corrected.

Joel whistled softly. "How are we going to dig it out? Magic?"

"We're not going to lift a finger," Jedidiah declared. "Clearing the gate is the banelich's problem."

Holly nodded and grinned. "Good strategy," she complimented Jedidiah.

"How so?" Joel asked.

"It will test the powers of the banelich, maybe even wear him out some before we pass through the gate," the paladin explained.

They pitched a tarp over the hollow in the sand dune. Joel and Holly slid down to the base of the dune, leaving Jedidiah reclining beneath the tarp, blowing melodies with his glaur. The horn sounded for miles around in the clear air, serving as an anchor for the two young adventurers as they explored the surrounding desert.

After nearly an hour, having discovered nothing but sand, the bard and paladin practiced at swordplay. Holly was more skilled with a blade and offered Joel several pointers. She drilled him until he'd corrected his most glaring errors.

As the sun climbed higher, the air grew baking hot. Jedidiah called Joel and Holly out of the sun. Parched and exhausted, the pair joined the older man beneath the tarp. They ate and drank some of the food and water, then Holly lay down and napped. Once she was sleeping soundly, Jedidiah had Joel review the tulip song he'd taught him the day before. Then they talked together softly, not about the finder's stone or the Hand of Bane or the trials to come, but about Netheril. Jedidiah knew as many tales about the lost kingdom and its fall as he did about the Dalelands.

If he closed his eyes, Joel could still picture Jedidiah as the old priest who'd first befriended him, could almost imagine that they sat by a fire—a very warm fire—in a tavern in Berdusk. Jedidiah's younger appearance might not have bothered the Rebel Bard at all, except that it served as a constant reminder of the loss of the finder's stone. If not for the bargain that hung over them, Joel realized, he would have been comfortable with Jedidiah whatever form he wore.

Holly woke and listened to Jedidiah's tales with obvious pleasure. While she disapproved of the older man's bargain with the banelich, it was obvious she still liked him. Of course, Joel thought, she was unfettered by the knowledge that Jedidiah was not merely serving Finder, but actually was Finder.

The sun westered, and a soft breeze played with the sand around them, bringing with it the promise of a cool night. Jedidiah stood and stretched, then climbed to the top of the dune. Joel and Holly followed. The older priest stood looking eastward, toward the Desertsouth Mountains, frowning.

"They aren't expecting us to be here until tomorrow," Joel reminded him.

"Yes," Jedidiah replied, "but I thought they might arrive early to scout out the area, perhaps even set some sort of trap for us. Your Walinda has disappointed me. I expected more treachery from her."

"Maybe they're having trouble finding the gate," Joel suggested.

Jedidiah shook his head, denying that possibility.

"Do you think something happened to them?" Joel asked.

"Wouldn't that be nice," Holly muttered.

Sunset in the desert was magnificent, painting the sky crimson, magenta, and purple. The night sky that succeeded it was no less beautiful; a myriad of stars shimmered and twinkled like gems in the goddess Selune's jewel box.

The air grew chill, and Joel and Holly returned to huddle under the tarp, leaving Jedidiah to maintain his vigil. Using two of the spells Jedidiah had taught him the day before, Joel created more water, then heated the metal flask it was in until the water steamed. He and Holly brewed tea and sipped at it. Then they carried some of the hot beverage up to Jedidiah.

"Come back to the shelter, Jedidiah," Holly coaxed the older man. "I'll sense them long before you see them," she said.

Jedidiah took the tea. "Do you think so?" he asked the paladin with a secretive smile.

Joel wondered just how good the god's eyes were at seeing across the void in the dark. Were they even better when he had all his godly power? Of course, if Jedidiah had all his godly power, he could sense the banelich, too.

When Jedidiah had finished the tea and handed the cup back to Holly, he reached in his boot and pulled out the saurial's half of the finder's stone. The yellow gem glowed in the dark.

Holly gasped. Joel explained quickly that the stone was the sister to the first.

"What happens if you put the two pieces together?" Holly asked.

"Nothing," Jedidiah said. "Finder rent it asunder to get at the paraelemental ice at its core. That's how he destroyed Moander." The older man handed the gem to Joel. "Take this and think of Walinda," he ordered the young bard.

Joel held the stone. He was trying to recall in his mind's eye the priestess's features when he remembered the sensation of her hands about his throat. A thin beacon of light lanced out from the stone and arced across the sky toward the Desertsouth Mountains. Gently Jedidiah lifted the stone from Joel's hands. The beam of light blinked out.

"Did you do that to signal them?" Holly asked.

"No," Jedidiah replied. "I suspect the banelich always knows exactly where it is. I sent out the light to be sure they're not dead and still in the Realms."

"The light might attract other unwelcome creatures," Holly said.

"Wouldn't that be interesting?" Jedidiah said with a wicked grin.

Holly gave the older man a curious look, then turned away. "Wake me for last watch," she called as she slid toward the shelter. "I want to watch the sun come up."

Jedidiah took the first watch, sitting just outside the shelter. Joel, lying beside Holly in the shelter, quickly fell asleep from exhaustion, but when he awoke, sometime after moonrise, he couldn't fall back asleep. He slipped out of the tarp shelter. The air was so chill now he could see his breath. The new moon had risen over the dunes. Jedidiah sat watching it, softly humming *The Tears of Selune*, a song the god had written, as a mortal, in honor of the goddess of the moon. "Anything?" Joel asked, sitting down beside his god.

Jedidiah shook his head. "Holly's probably right-she'll sense it long before we see it. You didn't sleep that long," he noted. "If you need more rest, I can stand watch longer."

"Don't you get tired?" Joel asked.

Jedidiah nodded his head. "Without the power I put in the stone, I need sleep to replenish my energies".

Joel felt a wave of protectiveness sweep over him, as if Jedidiah really was an older mortal man. "Let me take the watch now," he insisted. "You'll need all your strength tomorrow for dealing with the banelich."

"You're probably right," the weakened god replied. He reached over and squeezed the young bard's shoulder. "Thank you," he said. "Thank you for everything."

Joel smiled warmly, glad to help his god with so small a task. Jedidiah retired into the shelter. Joel watched the moon, humming "The Tears of Selune" just as Jedidiah had

A shadow crossed the corner of the moon and dived behind a dune, startling Joel out of his musical reverie. The Rebel Bard stood up. The night sky was cloudless. The shadow might have come from a hunting owl, but it had seemed too large. He shifted uncomfortably, wondering if the finder's stone beacon had attracted some deadly denizen of the sky.

The bard stood up and paced in order to stay more alert, singing softly to himself. No other sight or sound disturbed the night scene. By the time Holly came out to relieve him, the breeze had died and the young priest of Finder had grown bored with the stillness of the night. He tumbled off to sleep without another thought. When Joel awoke, the sun had risen. Jedidiah was sitting outside the tarp, sipping some tea and enjoying the warm sunlight on his face. Holly was atop the dune, praying to her god. She came down and joined the others for breakfast. The paladin was just biting into a piece of dried fruit when she froze. "They're coming!" the girl cried out loudly.

Joel and Jedidiah climbed to the top of the dune. A blot appeared on the disk of the rising sun. The blot grew larger, until Joel could make out the features of the spelljammer. The ship approached the dune on which they stood and circled around them. Walinda stood on the deck, looking

down on them. She had a new figurehead chained to the bow, a deformed, fire-blackened creature with batlike wings beneath its arms and a steel patch covering its right eye.

"It's Bear," Joel whispered to Jedidiah. "What's that around his neck?" he asked, noticing a glowing red band fastened about the dark stalker's throat.

"Something to keep him from regenerating," Jedidiah replied. "A metal torque, heated by magic. It burns the wearer to a crisp. How does she stand the smell?" the god wondered aloud.

Joel felt his stomach churn.

"Looks like Bear got his licks in, though," Jedidiah muttered. "Your priestess has taken some serious damage."

Joel looked toward Walinda. Her left arm was wrapped in bloodstained bandages and set in a sling.

The flying shrine settled downward until it rested before the pillars of the gate.

Holly Joel, and Jedidiah made their way down the dune. By the time they'd reached the bottom, the banelich stood on the deck.

Joel felt his stomach churn once again at the sight of the creature. The banelich looked no less threatening in the daylight. It had altered its adornment in a most threatening manner. On its forehead, where the large diamond had been, was the stolen half of the finder's stone. In order to affix the larger gem more firmly to its person, the banelich had smashed a hole in its skull and wedged the gem between the shattered edges of the bone. The skin of its forehead flapped in ragged tatters about the glittering yellow stone.

"That's not a good sign," Jedidiah muttered. With a false cheery tone, he called out, "It's about time you got here. We were worried something might have happened to you. Any problems?"

"None worth mentioning," the banelich replied with a hollow-chested wheeze. "I see you, too, have altered your appearance, priest."

Jedidiah grinned. "A younger look is sometimes advantageous, as your priestess here could no doubt tell you. You might try it some time."

The banelich snorted derisively, Walinda glared coldly at Jedidiah, but she said nothing. She stood straight as a rail, but her face was pale.

"Well, I hope you brought your shovels," Jedidiah said, "because you've got a lot of digging to do to reach your gate."

Something swooped down out of the sun, over the ship, and dropped two glittering flasks, which shattered on the banelich's chest plate. As Joel's eyes followed the creature, it pulled up and circled about with a flurry of pink wings.

"Jas!" he gasped.

The banelich howled, and curls of black smoke wafted up from beneath its armor. The creature staggered and dropped to one knee.

Joel looked to Jedidiah.

"Great. Just great," the god muttered. He looked around at Holly. The paladin flashed him a wolfish grin.

"What is it?" Joel whispered to Jedidiah. "Acid?"

"My guess is holy water," the older man whispered. "What happened to your promise not to do anything rash?" he growled at Holly.

"You knew she was coming?" Joel asked Holly.

"After Jas hits the lich with her second batch of holy water, we can attack," the paladin said, her hand gripping the hilt of her cutlass.

Jas swooped for a second attack. On the deck of the spelljammer, Walinda rushed to the banelich's side. The creature snarled and backhanded her. Walinda staggered backward. The banelich pulled itself upright and raised both its arms toward the winged woman.

The banelich began chanting harsh words in an ancient tongue. Black flame sprang from its hands and arced upward. Just as Jas released two more flasks, the banelich's

missiles slammed into her diving form. Jas screamed, a bone-chilling, inhuman cry.

The flasks of holy water hit their mark again, one on the banelich's shoulder, the other on its leg. The banelich howled once more, but its cry was drowned out by the shrieks of the winged woman. Like a burning black serpent, the banelich's flame wrapped itself about her form as she plunged headfirst into a sand dune.

Jas rolled in the sand, extinguishing the black fire but not the pain. She continued to thrash in agony.

"Kill her!" the smoking banelich demanded. Gripping her silver goad, Walinda leapt from the side of the ship, landing on both feet with the grace of an acrobat.

Her cutlass drawn and raised, Holly interposed herself between the priestess and the winged woman. Startled, the priestess pulled back. Wounded as she was, Walinda must have known she was no match for the holy warrior.

"You!" the banelich screeched at the paladin. "This water stinks of Lathander. This is your doing." He raised his arms in Holly's direction and began barking out the words to summon the black flames again.

"No!" Joel shouted, throwing himself in front of the paladin, determined to protect her.

The banelich halted. Fire danced in his hands, but he did not hurl it forward. "Tell your priest to move," he ordered Jedidiah, "or his life will be forfeit, too."

"Joel," Jedidiah implored, "back away."

Joel looked at his god with shock. "I can't let them kill Holly," he insisted. "Or Jas either."

"Jas and Holly started this," Jedidiah reminded him. "I don't want you to pay for their folly. I don't want you hurt."

Joel's eyes narrowed with anger. He recalled Grypht's parting words that Jedidiah could be reckless and thoughtless. He remembered, too, the saurial wizard's advice to use his influence to make the god show moderation and consideration.

"Joel!" Jedidiah snapped, his voice rough with warning.

"I'm not moving," Joel retorted.

Jedidiah's face clouded with anger.

Joel could picture the scene woven into a tableau someday on a tapestry in the Singing Cave—Jas lying in the sand, Holly poised with her cutlass raised between the winged woman and Walinda with her goad, the banelich standing on the spelljammer with his hands burning, and in the middle, Joel silently begging his angry god to do the right thing—assuming, of course, they lived through the next few moments to tell the tale to Copperbloom.

"I'm calling on you, Jedidiah, to protect us," the young priest announced.

Then Jedidiah's face flushed with shame, and Joel understood more than he wanted to about the god's feelings. Copperbloom had been Finder's first priestess, but Joel was his chosen priest. The god couldn't bring himself to refuse the young bard's prayer. On the other hand, without his power, he was vulnerable. He could lose face just as easily by trying to protect Joel and failing.

Jedidiah, though weak, was not without the resources of his wits. "Bane," the older priest barked, "end this now, or you will regret it."

"I do as I wish," the banelich retorted, his normally low voice rising in amazement. "Your arrogance is remarkable." He held his finger to the finder's stone embedded in his forehead. "I can crumble your precious stone with a touch. Or have you forgotten?"

"Then you will have nothing to bargain with when I retrieve the Hand of Bane."

"The hand for the stone ... that was our agreement," the banelich said. "That does not leave you anything to barter for the lives of these vermin." He pointed his hands in Holly's direction.

"I will snap one finger off the Hand of Bane for every death you cause here," Jedidiah threatened.

The banelich hesitated. Joel could feel his heart pounding in his chest. Five beats later the banelich lowered his hands, and the eldritch flames about them died. "The deaths of these vermin do not concern me," he said. He looked at Walinda. "Keep a watchful eye on them, slave," he ordered. He muttered a short, sharp chant and drifted over the railing of the spelljammer and down to the pillars of the gate.

Walinda held her goad at the ready as Jedidiah moved to Jas's side. The winged woman's skin was gray and covered with frost. The black flame had obviously been a coldfire missile.

"Keep an eye on her, Joel," Holly ordered the bard as she hurried to join Jedidiah.

Joel stood before the priestess. He nodded at her injured arm. "Bear do that?" he asked.

"Bear?" the priestess asked.

"The dark stalker you have chained to your bow," Joel said.

Walinda nodded. "Yes."

"I could heal it for you," the bard offered.

The priestess glared at the priest and backed away with a look of feral fear. "My god does not wish the injury healed," she growled.

"Why not?" Joel demanded angrily.

"This was not the first attack on my god that I failed to prevent. I was not sufficiently watchful. The dark stalker sneaked aboard while I slept and attacked Bane. I wear my wounds as punishment, but they are nothing compared to the loss of my god's love and approval. I will earn his forgiveness, though. Then he will grant me my spells again and I can heal myself."

Joel's stomach churned with disgust and anger. "That thing is a monster!" he said. "How can you remain by its side, let alone worship it?"

Walinda looked at him coolly. "You still do not understand what it means to truly serve your god. You learned nothing

in the Lost Vale, did you?" Joel fought back the urge to correct the priestess. It wouldn't be wise to let her know that he, too, traveled beside his god, that his god had been prepared to risk his power arguing for the life of his disobedient priest. "Maybe not," Joel answered the priestess, "but I suspect that Finder would forgive his priests for a little failing like sleeping." He turned and strode over to where Jedidiah and Holly were healing Jas.

Jedidiah had done all he could. Jas's skin was no longer so gray, but her breathing was shallow and she moaned in pain. Now Holly was calling on Lathander to help the winged woman. The paladin's arms glowed rosy pink, and she laid them on Jas's head, on her face, on her shoulders and arms and chest. Jas began to breathe more evenly, and she fell into a deep, peaceful sleep. Walinda approached them and peered down at her master's victim.

Jedidiah stood up, looking drained and tired. "She'll be all right," he said to Joel. "She'll be out for a while. All things considered, that's probably for the best."

"The black flaming death of Bane is most efficient," Walinda said, a touch of pride creeping into her voice.

Jedidiah harrumphed. "It was a coldfire missile ... a standard trick of all baneliches," he lectured the priestess. "It's nasty, but not in league with a real god's power."

Walinda raised her head proudly. "Delude yourself if you wish, priest. Deny that the living Bane is among you. But still he wields his might!" she declared, pointing with her goad toward the Cat's Gate.

The banelich hovered in front of the buried gate with its arms raised, chanting in its ancient tongue. The sand about the gate began to heave and roil as hundreds of skeletal forms, the dead from the army of the wizards of Netheril, pulled themselves from the earth. The banelich commanded them to clear the sand from the gate and they began to dig stiffly, using their own skulls to scoop out the sand.

"All praise and glory to mighty Bane!" Walinda whispered, her eyes riveted on the undead at their work.

"Animate dead," Jedidiah muttered. "Another favorite banelich trick." He turned to Joel. "Go help Holly move Jas under the tarp," he ordered. "I'll keep an eye on this fool woman."

As Joel turned, Jedidiah put a hand on his shoulder. "You'll have to tell Holly that she'll have to stay behind. There's no way the banelich is going to take her aboard after this stunt. But I suspect she knew that."

Joel nodded. "Thank you for your help," he said.

Jedidiah shrugged. He wasn't pleased, but then Joel suspected he would forgive his priest before the banelich forgave Walinda.

Using a cape as a stretcher, Joel helped Holly move Jas up the dune into the tarp shelter. Though a dead weight in her sleep, fortunately the winged woman wasn't very heavy.

"You knew Jas was coming. You gave her that holy water, didn't you?" the bard asked the paladin. "How could you? You promised Jedidiah you wouldn't do anything reckless."

Holly sighed. "When I visited the shrine to Lathander in the Lost Vale, I had another vision of a sunrise. When I came to, there was the holy water, in four little vials. It was a gift from my god. I showed the vials to Jas. She took them from me while I slept. I didn't notice they were missing until after she flew off. I didn't know she planned to follow us and use them."

"But it was a good bet she would," Joel said. "Why didn't you tell us?"

"She might have succeeded. You saw how the water vaporized the banelich's flesh. A few more attacks like that might have destroyed the creature." The paladin looked down on the winged woman with concern and disappointment. "Will she be all right until Grypht gets here?"

"She will if you watch over her," Joel said. "You're not coming with us now." I

Holly bristled. "I have to come with you," she insisted.

"Holly, think. The banelich is never going to agree to your coming after this. It thinks you were responsible for this attack. Jedidiah has used all his influence just to save your life. Besides, Jas needs you. Be reasonable. Please."

Holly looked down at Jas and brushed the woman's hair from her forehead. She looked back up at Joel. "You made Jedidiah stand up to the banelich, just as Grypht asked you to do," she said.

Joel looked down at the ground, unwilling to admit that Jedidiah had not behaved properly without Joel's urging.

"When Jedidiah has the Hand of Bane, can you make him do the right thing again?" she asked.

Joel shrugged, completely uncertain how far he could push his god, the god he had sworn to serve.

"Will you at least try?" Holly asked.

"I'll do what I can," he promised.

When Joel returned to Jedidiah's side, he found the older priest dragging Bear's deformed and mutilated body away from the spelljammer. "I convinced the banelich his figurehead might be considered in poor taste in the Outlands," he explained to the younger bard. "I suggest we cremate the creature."

Joel nodded. Together he and Jedidiah scavenged pieces of wood from the damaged portions of the spelljammer for a funeral pyre. Joel played a dirge as the former dalesman's corpse went up in flames. When the flames died out, the two men spread the dark stalker's ashes on the sand.

Before sunset, the gate was clear. The sight was amazing. Green light shimmered between the pillars, and every so often a bolt of green lightning streaked across the gate.

Joel and Jedidiah went to bid Holly good-bye. Jas was still sleeping. Jedidiah warned Holly, "Don't try to follow us. You'd never keep up with the spelljammer, and you'd be

challenged everywhere you went in the Outlands, possibly even enslaved. It's not like the dales where you can simply roam where you please."

"Unless you're traveling with a banelich?" Holly asked sarcastically.

Jedidiah looked pained, but the paladin put him at his ease. "I'm sorry. I won't follow you through the gate," she said. "Take care," she added. She embraced the older priest.

Jedidiah smiled grimly. "It's been an honor traveling with you, Holly Harrowslough," he said and left her alone with his student.

Holly turned to Joel and gave him a quick hug. It occurred to the Rebel Bard that, while she had embraced Jedidiah like a father, she treated him with maidenly modesty. For the first time, the bard thought of her as a pretty girl and not simply a warrior. He smiled shyly and wished her luck. Then he turned to follow Jedidiah down the sand dune.

When Joel and Jedidiah came aboard, the banelich was smiling. It looked exceedingly pleased with itself. Walinda looked at the gate with excitement in her eyes.

"I give you leave to heal my slave's injuries," the banelich said to Joel. "If it pleases you," it added with a smirk. Then it disappeared into the ship's cabin. The spelljammer rose slowly and began to turn toward the gate.

"Should I heal her arm?" Joel asked Jedidiah in a whisper, uncertain how his god would feel about his offering aid to the priestess of Bane.

"I think that would be a good idea," Jedidiah said, but he didn't elaborate.

Joel prayed over Walinda's bandages. Blue healing energy flowed from his hands over the priestess's arm. Carefully he unwrapped the bandages. The healing was perfect. The skin on the priestess's arm was soft and smooth, but there were bruises beneath the skin that were too old to have been caused by Bear. Joel remembered that when she had fought the Xvimists for entry into the Flaming Tower,

she had worn bracers. "The banelich did this to you, didn't it?" Joel asked, feeling sympathy for the woman despite himself.

"Yes," the priestess replied. "It is his right," she said with the far-off look and smile of a woman smitten.

Joel turned away in disgust, not wishing to hear a single word more.

Slowly the ship moved toward the Cat's Gate. Joel looked back and caught a glimpse of the paladin watching them leave. He raised his hand to wave good-bye, but in the next instant, the ship was bathed in a green radiance and he could see nothing beyond the light. A dizzy sensation came over him as the ship crossed from the Realms to a new plane.

From the dune above, Holly watched as Jas's spelljammer seemed to be consumed with green fire. As it passed between the gate's pillars, it disappeared. Even as she watched, sand began drifting back into the gate, filling up the space between the pillars.

Holly sighed. There was no sense following them. Jedidiah had been right. She'd never keep up with the spelljammer. She was almost ready to wish she hadn't remained silent about Jas and the holy water. "If only there was another way to follow them," she muttered.

"Well, actually, there is," a melodious voice called out from behind her.

Holly jumped and wheeled about. Perched on the top of the dune was a large bird. As she watched, the bird spread its tail feathers in a magnificent display of yellow, crimson, and magenta. It was a ruby peacock, Lathander's bird.

Holly felt a great blast of hot wind, just as she had in her last two visions. She dropped to one knee and bowed her head.

"I bring word for you from Lathander," the bird chirped. "He is most pleased with your actions in his name. You've done as well as can be expected for someone with your

limitations. Lathander has chosen to reward your efforts with a chance to serve him further."

"I live to serve," Holly whispered modestly.

"The Hand of Bane is in Sigil. You must go there and find it."

"I don't know the way," Holly said.

The peacock's tail began to glow brightly and grew as hot as the sun. The tail flared and became an arched doorway. A red light, like the setting sun, glowed in the archway.

"Take this door to Sigil," the peacock's voice commanded.

Holly looked back at the tarp shelter where Jas rested. "But my friend is wounded. I have to wait for help so she'll be safe," the paladin explained.

"Come now, Holly Harrowslough," the bird said softly. "Your god needs your services. Do you deny your god?"

"I need to make sure my friend is all right," the paladin said.

"I will watch over her," the bird's voice offered, "even though she does not follow our master. I will make sure she awakes safely."

"Thank you," Holly said. She climbed to the top of the dune, took a deep breath, and plunged into the crimson portal.

The doorway flashed gold, then transformed back into a ruby peacock. The large bird shrank until it was the size and shape of a cardinal, then hopped up to the edge of the tarp to watch over Jas's inert form.

Shortly after dark, the winged woman stirred, called out Holly's name, and sat up. She blinked in the darkness, then lay back down to sleep again.

Having fulfilled the letter of its promise, the bird flew off toward the east. It passed over a group of human riders, dressed in black armor, whose leader wore the green and black of Iyachtu Xvim. The riders were heading west toward Cat's Gate. At the speed they traveled, they would reach the gate before dawn.

Thirteen

Ilsensine's Realm

As the spelljammer passed through the gate into the lands beyond, Joel felt a jolt to his equilibrium. The ship's bow pitched upward, as if it had encountered a wave at sea. As the ship shot up into the sky, Joel fell backward and slid back into the cabin. Jedidiah, who had managed to grab the ship's rail, cried out, "Level her out!"

The ship's bow came down, pitched forward slightly, then leveled off again. Joel pulled himself shakily to his feet and made his way back to Jedidiah's side, clinging to the rail like a seasick novice. The tusk throne in which Walinda sat must have been fastened to the deck, for it remained upright. The priestess clung to the chair's armrests, looking startled. "What was that?" Joel asked. Jedidiah pointed back toward the magical gate. While it had been perfectly perpendicular to the ground back in the desert, here it had tilted backward forty-five degrees, so they had entered the Outlands at a steep angle in relation to the earth.

"That explains the sand," Jedidiah muttered.

"What?" Joel asked.

"The sand burying the gate back in the desert," the older priest explained. "It should have spilled out onto this side of the gate, blocking our entrance into this plane, but the way the gate is tilted on this side, any sand that passes through it falls right back to the other side."

"How did the gate get tipped like that?" Joel wondered.

"Judging from the land about us," Jedidiah replied, "I'd say it's the natural state of things."

Joel surveyed the world he'd just entered. "The natural state of things" seemed to be quite unnatural. It was as if some god had strewn the geographical features about at random. Tall, spindly mountains rose from perfectly level plains without a hint of a foothill about them. A stone ledge,

wider than the base of the peak it surrounded, jutted out like a shelf mushroom on a tree. Several peaks bent over and downward, like trees growing on a windy slope. Rivers originating from nowhere meandered about and ended without outlet; one stream even circled back on itself. Lakes dotted mountain plateaus. A swamp grew out of a hillside. Fields had been tilled in serpentine squiggles. Trees were planted to spell out entire lines of unknown script.

The colors of the land were unusual as well—pale and indistinct. When Joel focused on any one feature of the landscape, its color seemed to blur with the background.

"Painted by a mad and myopic god with a muddy palette," Jedidiah joked. "Or maybe it's just faded from a thousand too many launderings, eh?"

Walinda, who had joined the priests at the railing, soon turned away, looking disturbed. "It's horrible," she said.

"It's not that bad," Joel replied.

"There is no order, no reason," Walinda insisted.

"But it's so interesting, so ... wild," Joel argued.

"Forget it, Joel," Jedidiah said. "You'll never get a Banite to appreciate the beauty of chaos."

"It's a beautiful sky," Joel pointed out to the priestess. "Bright and blue."

"There's no sun," Walinda said. "It's broad daylight, yet there is no sun."

Joel searched the sky and the horizon carefully. Far off in the distance, a great brown spire rose from the horizon, reaching so far into the sky that clouds obscured its summit. But Walinda was right. There was no sun.

"Well, the air is good," Joel said. Indeed the air felt fresh, as if it had just been created and never breathed before by any other living creature. It made his skin tingle. At first he thought he was just noting the different between the hot, dry air of the desert and the cool, moist air of the Outlands, but the sensation persisted. There was a vitality to this plane he could sense.

Walinda shrugged, indifferent to the air. "My lord Bane said there are gods who make their homes here. Why would they choose such a place?" she asked.

"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder," Jedidiah said, winking at Joel. "In this case, the beholder would be Gzemnid, god of the eye tyrants. He makes his home in this plane. Judging from the chaotic landscape, I'd guess we're not too far from his realm. Other parts of this plane are very different. All the outer planes have at least one gate leading to the Outlands. The area surrounding each gate takes on characteristics of the plane to which it leads. For instance, in the far-off city of Rigus, there's a gate to Acheron, where your lord Bane made his home before he became a corpse floating in the astral plane. Everyone in Rigus has a rank: slave soldier, citizen, private, sergeant, lieutenant, captain, general. You'd feel right at home."

The ship drifted downward, settling in a rocky field where the ground was ridged and uneven, like a frozen, choppy sea.

The banelich came out of the cabin and walked toward the bow. It stopped at the railing and flung one skeletal arm in the direction of the great spire that rose beyond the horizon. "Lo!" it bellowed.

"Hello, yourself," Jedidiah replied with a grin.

The banelich ignored the taunt. "There," the creature announced, "is our goal. Upon that peak rests the city of Sigil, wherein is hid the Hand of Bane. We will besiege the city to reclaim what is mine, and with it, my power."

As if on cue, the clouds about the spire drifted outward, revealing the spire's summit. Floating above the summit was a huge circular ring.

Jedidiah guffawed.

The banelich frowned and wheeled about to face the priest.

Jedidiah continued to laugh, long and hard, clutching his side.

"I said nothing amusing," the banelich declared coldly.

Jedidiah took a few deep breaths and managed to control himself. He wiped a tear from one eye. He had to stifle one last giggle before he finally became serious once more. "No," he replied at last. "Of course you didn't say anything amusing. I was laughing at your folly."

Walinda glared at Jedidiah as her master kept a stony silence.

"I don't suppose you'd care for the benefit of my counsel?" Jedidiah asked.

"Proceed," the banelich ordered.

"There are so many things wrong with your plan, I hardly know where to begin," Jedidiah said. "I suppose we could start with the least of the problems. Sigil is called the City of Doors because everyone comes and goes by magical portals. There are hundreds of them. You can't besiege a city unless you can cover all those doors. Next, the population of Sigil is at least twice that of Waterdeep, with ten times the number of powerful beings. At least. Not even you could conquer a city that size. You'd be overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of people who would stand against you. Then there's the mazes. Anyone considered a serious threat to the peace and security of the city finds himself trapped in amaze and shipped deep into the ethereal plane."

The banelich nodded. "So we need to approach the city by stealth, after dark," he said, "and search for the Hand of Bane in secret."

"Well, that's another one of your problems," Jedidiah said. "You can't approach the city at all."

"What lies you speak!" Walinda snapped angrily. The city is right there," she said, motioning to the torus above the spire. "We can see it directly ahead of us. We simply head for it." She looked at her master for approval, but the banelich remained silent, waiting for Jedidiah to explain himself.

"Just because you can see it doesn't mean you can reach it," Jedidiah said. "Some scholars say the spire is infinitely

high and the city is merely a mirage, a projection of the real city over the spire. Other scholars claim you do indeed see the city, but magic cast on the spire limits your travel upward by half the distance between yourself and the city, so that you can go halfway, then three quarters of the way, then seven eighths of the way, then fifteen sixteenths of the way, and so forth. But no matter how close you come, you never actually get there."

Walinda's expression became confused for a moment, then she shook herself, and her angry expression returned. "You are babbling philosophical nonsense. My lord Bane, why do you allow this fool to continue?"

"You're free to fly there and test what I say," Jedidiah said to the priestess with a sly grin.

"We shall!" Walinda insisted.

"Though this ship and your master are likely to fall apart long before we even get close. The closer one gets to the spire, the more magical powers fail. As we approach, our most powerful magic will be neutralized first. I recommend we don't fly too high, because at some indeterminable point, the spelljammer's helm will cease to function. Still farther in, the most powerful spells granted by the gods to their priests shut down. That would include, I suspect, the forces that animate baneliches. You'd be reduced to a pile of bones and ragged flesh. Closer in than that, minor gods cannot use their power. At the base of the spire, there is no magic whatsoever. No heal spells, no light spells. No god's power works; not even Bane at his height could wield power there."

The banelich remained silent for several moments. Then he asked Jedidiah, "So how do you propose we enter Sigil?"

"Like everyone else does ... via a portal. We make our way toward the Palace of Judgment, where I have some modest contacts who can arrange for us to use one of their portals. If we are where I think we are, not far from the city of Bedlam, we can reach the palace by keeping the spire on our starboard bow."

"For how long?" the banelich asked.

Jedidiah shrugged. "For as long as it takes. It's impossible to judge something like that in this plane. It could be a few days, or it could take a month. The sooner we get moving, the sooner we'll get there."

The banelich studied Jedidiah in silence for several long moments, as if trying to detect any hints of treachery or falsehood. At last he nodded. "We will attempt entering Sigil your way." He turned to head back to the cabin. Walinda followed behind him.

"Oh, there's just one more thing," Jedidiah called out.

The banelich turned and waited for Jedidiah to continue.

"You know you probably can't enter Sigil with us."

The banelich drew back as if it had been slapped.

"No gods can enter, remember? Some great power prohibits the entry of all gods. I'm willing to bet that holds true for a god's essence as well. You won't be able to pass through the portal."

"I had not forgotten," the banelich replied coolly. "My slave will act on my behalf and oversee the recovery of the hand."

"But, my lord," Walinda protested, "if I leave you-"

The banelich whirled with its skeletal arm raised as if to deliver a blow to his priestess. Walinda winced involuntarily and said nothing more. The banelich turned and strode back into the cabin. Walinda hesitated on the deck, obviously uncertain whether her god would welcome her presence.

"For the essence of a god, your lord seems pretty uninformed," Jedidiah noted. "It's common knowledge among travelers of the planes that you can't enter Sigil except by means of a portal. You know, it seemed to me your master forgot it couldn't come with us, too. I wonder if some of the magic holding it together isn't already being neutralized."

Walinda turned and scowled at the older priest "Perhaps my lord was just testing you," she retorted Then she hurried

after the banelich.

The ship rose a few feet from the ground and glided in the direction Jedidiah had suggested.

"So does this mean you can't get into Sigil either?" Joel whispered.

"Not as I am," Jedidiah said. "But I think there's a trick I might be able to use to get in. It's reckless, but it just might work."

According to Grypht, Joel recalled, recklessness was Jedidiah's other major fault. "What is it?" he asked.

"I'll tell you later, when we can be sure of our privacy," Jedidiah promised.

The rest of that day Joel spent at the ship's rail, amazed by the geological oddities that made up the landscape—vertically stratified rocks resembling tomes on a wizard's shelf, a lake filled with multicolored geysers, a hand carved of granite rising from the earth, Clouds of all colors formed out of nowhere and disappeared just as mysteriously. Although there was no sun to set, night came on gradually, the blue sky darkening to indigo, then black. No moon or stars shone in the darkness, but the land seemed to glow with its own pale light.

Sometime after dark, Jedidiah pulled out the finder's stone and held it out. A beacon of light shot out from the stone in a direction a few degrees to the left of their current heading.

"We're a little off course, but nothing that can't be corrected in the morning. Time to get some sleep."

If not for the ship being a shrine to Bane and the task that awaited them, Joel might have found the next two days of travel almost pleasant. The cruise was smooth, and he and Jedidiah had plenty of leisure time. When they weren't eating or sleeping, they watched the scenery, practiced spells, sang, or talked.

Except for checking up on them several times a day, the priestess avoided the two men. At first Joel felt relieved that

Walinda was no longer showing any interest in him, but that left him to wonder why. Was the banelich forbidding her to communicate with the men as punishment, or perhaps out of fear that she might grow too close to them and betray her master? If keeping her distance was Walinda's idea, what did she hope to accomplish? Was she punishing herself? Was she hoping to prove her loyalty and thus curry the favor of her master?

The banelich had given them the run of the ship, save for the captain's chart room where the creature usually stayed and the crew quarters where Walinda slept. According to Jas, whom Jedidiah had questioned in the Lost Vale, the upper decks had been sheered off when Jas and her crew were escaping from the illithids. Joel explored all that was left of the ship—the lower deck, the cargo hold, and the roofless battle deck. Everything of value had been stripped away, no doubt by Walinda's followers. It was during their second night in the Outlands, while he was poking around the ruined battle deck, that Joel discovered the spy hole.

There was a square of floorboards that was cleaner than the rest of the deck, as if someone had pried up a bench or a storage box. In the center of the square, a bottle cork filled an eye-sized knothole in a floorboard. Curious, Joel pulled at the cork. Beneath the knothole, someone had drilled through the subflooring and the ceiling of the cabin below. Cautiously Joel got down on his stomach and put his eye to the hole.

Some mechanism or magic gave the bard a panoramic view of the whole room below. He found himself staring into the captain's map room, where the banelich sat in state on a throne of iron and silver. From his discussions with Jedidiah, Joel realized that the throne had to be the ship's spelljamming helm, the magical artifact used to power the ship. The banelich looked up at the ceiling, seemingly straight at Joel.

With a sharp intake of breath, Joel pulled away from the hole and froze. After a few moments' thought, Joel realized the undead creature couldn't possibly have seen him. He peered back down the spy hole.

The banelich held the stolen half of the finder's stone in its lap, stroking the yellow gemstone greedily. The gem sparkled in the light given off from a nearby brazier.

Walinda stepped forward. The priestess wore the same black velvet gown she'd worn the night she'd stolen the finder's stone. Her hair hung down her back, loose and shining. She set a golden bowl down in the brazier. The banelich set the finder's stone in the bowl. Walinda rolled up the sleeve of her left arm.

Taking the priestess's arm, the banelich ran its fingertips along her veins. Black marks appeared where the banelich touched her. Walinda winced and clenched her teeth, but she didn't utter a sound. Like a snake striking out, the banelich sunk its teeth into Walinda's wrist and tightened its jaws into her flesh until blood began to flow from her arm. Walinda's body jerked, but once again she didn't make a sound.

The lich sat up straight again, licking the blood from its teeth with its black tongue. It held Walinda's bleeding arm over the golden bowl in the brazier. Walinda's blood poured over the finder's stone and hissed in the bottom of the warmed bowl. The bowl began to fill with bubbling, congealing blood. Joel thought he could smell the stench through the floorboards, though it could have been his sickened imagination.

Walinda began to swoon. The banelich released her arm. The priestess sank to the floor and collapsed in a heap.

The banelich fished the finder's stone out of the blood-filled bowl and positioned the gem back into the hole in its skull. With both hands, the undead creature smeared the congealing blood over the stone and his skull. The blood began to glow. When the banelich had finished, new flesh

appeared around the hole in its skull, and the finder's stone was covered with a transparent layer of skin that held it more firmly in place.

Joel rolled away from the hole as quickly and silently as possible. He crawled toward the stern. Just past the cargo bay, he began retching. When he'd once again regained control of his stomach, Joel crawled back down the steps to the lower deck, where he and Jedidiah had set up their quarters.

Jedidiah listened with consternation to Joel's report.

"The banelich means to keep the stone, doesn't it?" Joel asked.

"Probably," Jedidiah agreed. "No doubt Walinda and her master intend some treachery to get the Hand of Bane from us once we've obtained it so they don't have to trade for it."

"What can we do?" Joel asked.

"Nothing for the moment," Jedidiah replied, scowling angrily. "After we get the hand, we'll have to be very, very careful."

Early the following evening Joel began to notice a buzzing in his head. He couldn't say for sure how long he'd been hearing it, but it was beginning to give him a headache. He mentioned it to Jedidiah when he explained he was going to bed early.

Jedidiah began to say good night, then stopped and his eyes widened. "Gods! I'm an idiot," he declared. "Get below deck," he ordered Joel as he wheeled about and headed for the cabin, shouting Walinda's name.

Joel grabbed his pack and followed his god into the cabin. He heard Jedidiah shouting, "Hard aport. And pick up speed if you can. We've come too close to a very dangerous place."

Joel peered out the cabin door. Jedidiah had left his pack leaning against the railing. Joel paused to debate the wisdom of running out and grabbing it.

Then something grabbed him. From over the cabin door, two tentacles lashed downward and around Joel's right arm

and throat.

The young bard screamed as he was lifted bodily to the roof of the cabin. He found himself face-to-face with the most loathsome-looking creature he'd ever seen. Its head looked like a huge exposed brain, four feet across, with no apparent eyes and a great sharp beak for a mouth. It had no body, but floated in the air, trailing several tentacles as long as a man.

A swarm of the large creatures surrounded the ship. Several hovered over the rail and the cabin. From the cabin door below, Joel could hear Jedidiah chanting a spell. A silver war hammer manifested above the deck and shot out toward the lead creature. Tin magically summoned weapon buried itself into the creature's brain with a sickening squishing sound. The creature chirped but didn't fall.

Joel reached for his scabbard, but the creature holding him had already removed his sword with one of its tentacles. The remaining appendages wrapped about the bard's other arms and legs. Joel felt his skin tingle, as if he were being pricked with hundreds of sharp needles and pins, then go completely numb. His muscles no longer responded to his commands.

The other tentacled creatures began to float down the cargo bay to the deck below.

From what seemed far off, Joel heard the banelich's voice rise in an arcane chant. There was a clap of thunder, and a great cloud of smoke burst across the bow. A flaming chariot, pulled by two fiery horses, appeared on the cargo deck. The banelich stepped out of the cabin and fired off four black bolts of cold fire at the two creatures blocking his route to the chariot. They fell to the deck, their tentacles writhing like worms. Walinda, dressed in her plate mail and armed with her goad, rushed out onto the deck. The banelich climbed into the chariot with the priestess at its heels.

More attackers swarmed toward the followers of Bane, but the creatures were instantly singed by the flames burning

about the chariot. Quickly they withdrew their scorched tentacles and curled them up beneath their bodies. The priestess and her master flew off. A flock of attackers flew after them, but the tentacled creatures couldn't keep up with the magical chariot.

The spelljammer ship began to sink slowly toward the earth. Joel, paralyzed in the tentacles of the creature that had attacked him, could do nothing but watch. Jedidiah emerged from the cabin, swinging a sword. It seemed to Joel that his god was floating in the air toward him as he lopped off tentacles to the left and right. Soon Jedidiah disappeared behind a swarm of the attackers. Then darkness claimed Joel.

When Joel awoke, Jedidiah was hovering over him with a look of grave concern.

"Glad you could join us," the god said. "Though you may wish you hadn't," he added grimly.

Joel discovered the numbness had left his muscles and he was able to sit up. Then he heard what sounded like shouting inside his head. Horrible ideas came spilling into his brain. He was nothing more than cattle, meant to be ruled by others. Only illithids were fit to rule, and one day they would conquer the multiverse. Joel put his hands to his head, but the shouting didn't stop.

Jedidiah covered his priest's head with his hands and muttered a quick chant. In a few moments, the shouting in Joel's head died down to a dull roar, then a persistent whispering.

"That should hold you for a little while," Jedidiah said. "I'm not sure if we'll have much more time than that."

The young bard looked around. They were in a small cavern lit by a light stone. The walls were covered with slimy black fungus. Walinda and the banelich were nowhere to be seen. Joel recalled how the two followers of Bane had fled the battle with the tentacled creatures. Then Joel saw

something on Jedidiah's face that he'd never seen there before—fear. Something had frightened his god terribly.

"What happened?" Joel asked. "Where are we?"

"We strayed over the realm of Ilsensine," Jedidiah explained. "Ilsensine is the god of the illithids, or mind flayers, as they're called in the Realms. A very powerful god. Jas stole a spelljammer hull from the illithids, the same hull we were caught with. Ilsensine believes the illithids are the only beings fit to rule the universe. We're nothing but human cattle as far as he's concerned. The sight of us flying around in one of the illithids' ships was bound to upset their god."

"Uh-oh," Joel murmured.

"Uh-oh is right," Jedidiah replied grimly. "I'm a fool that it didn't occur to me just how far Ilsensine's senses reached. When it detected us, it sent some of its zombie slaves to bring us to its court. The banelich and Walinda fled in a magic chariot."

"Did you say those creatures with tentacles were zombies?" Joel asked.

Jedidiah nodded. "Sort of. They're called grell, and ordinarily they would simply eat us and be done with it, but the ones that attacked us are brain-burned puppets of the illithid god. They're not really undead—they just lack minds of their own. Like the illithids who worship their god, Ilsensine devours the thoughts of others."

"Is that what's going to happen to us?" Joel asked, understanding now the fear in his god's face.

"I think we're about to find out," Jedidiah said, nodding at something behind Joel.

The young bard turned around. A male dwarf stood in the doorway. The creature's eyes were as blank as a statue's, and his clothing hung in rags on his nearly skeletal frame.

"Follow," the dwarf croaked.

Jedidiah picked up his light stone, stood up, and helped Joel to his feet. "Joel, I need to concentrate on protecting our

minds so Ilsensine can't tell what we're thinking," the older man whispered in his ear. "You must do the talking. Tell it whatever it takes to get us out of here."

Together god and priest followed the zombie dwarf through a twisting maze of tunnels until they came to a vast cavern. Over fifty zombie grell and five zombie humans stood guard over a myriad of tunnel entrances that led into the cavern. A strange scent, like vinegar, assaulted Joel's nostrils.

In the center of the cavern was a bed of what appeared to be burning coals, except that the coals glowed not red but green. Acidic vapors rose from the coals, apparently the source of the vinegary smell. Joel was wondering if they were going to be thrown into the fire when the coals began to bubble and rise like bread. In another moment, the coals took on the appearance of a huge brain, the color of polished jade, ten times larger than the brains of the grell. Sections of the brain pulsed and throbbed. Innumerable tentacles hung down from the brain and reached, like roots, into the stone below. Two shorter tentacles waved before the creature's brain body.

The voice that had shouted in Joel's head began to reassert itself, like the droning of a self-absorbed lecturer. He felt an incredible sense of pressure on his brain, as if it were a walnut someone were trying to crack. His skin crawled with a primal instinct. He stood in the presence of a power so great and so evil he didn't need Holly's paladin's sense to detect it.

Then the voice in the bard's head spoke directly to him, and Joel knew then that the green monstrosity before him was the god of the illithids, Ilsensine.

What have you to say for yourselves, thieves?

Joel bowed low before the floating brain. "Your pardon, great one," he said, "Taut we are not thieves." His voice in the great cavern sounded very small.

You were caught with the stolen property of our people. You are thieves.

"The spelljammer, yes," Joel said. "My associates took it from the thieves, and together we brought it to your realm, Lord Ilsensine. In reparation for the damages done to the vessel, please accept the spelljammer helm attached to the vessel. It belonged to the thieves."

The pressure on Joel's brain increased. He raised his hands to his throbbing temples in a futile effort to massage away the pain.

Your mind cannot remain closed to us forever, the voice declared. We will know if you are lying.

"It is as you say, great lord, but perhaps we can come to some agreement that you will find more satisfying than draining the dregs of our minds," Joel replied.

We must know who you are, the voice insisted.

"I am Joel, and this is Jedidiah. We are priests of Finder," Joel replied.

We have never heard of this Finder.

"Thank you very much," Jedidiah muttered softly, so that only Joel heard him.

"Finder has dominion over the cycle of life and the transformation of arts," Joel explained, trying to deepen his voice to fill the room. "He is worshiped by artists and bards seeking to renew their work."

Now we recall. The slayer of Moander. A demi-power worshiped only in Abeir-Toril. There are so many gods worshiped in that world it's hard to keep track of them all. We wouldn't be surprised to find they have a god there with dominion over the tableware and ale mugs.

Jedidiah chuckled with amusement. The laughter sounded so genuine that Joel would have been hard pressed to say whether his god was truly amused or just humoring Ilsensine. Joel chuckled as well.

If you are not thieves, why did two of your party flee? the voice asked.

"They were priests of Bane, Lord Ilsensine," Joel explained. "They stole the ship from the original thieves. We tricked them into flying over your territory."

There was a momentary silence. Then the god of the illithids said in their heads, Even if you did not steal our people's ship, there is still the question of trespass. No one enters our realm without paying tribute to us.

"We brought you your ship," Joel pointed out.

You cannot offer what you do not own as tribute.

"What can we offer you, Lord Ilsensine?" Joel asked.

Knowledge is the only power, Ilsensine said. Unless there is some knowledge you possess that we do not, your lives are forfeit.

Joel choked back his anger at the god's injustice and struggled with his fear that he had nothing to offer. He bowed his head modestly. "My only expertise is music, O great lord."

Then we will have a song. Something we have never heard before. Come forward so that we might take one from your mind. Be warned, however, that we will not stop until we find one we have not heard before.

Joel swallowed. There had to be something in his repertoire that the god hadn't heard ... he hoped. He stepped forward.

"No!" Jedidiah declared, yanking the Rebel Bard back to his side. The incognito god stepped forward. "With respect, Lord Ilsensine," he said, "surely what you seek is not merely new knowledge, but exclusive knowledge. This one"—he nodded at Joel—"is my pupil. There is no song he knows that I do not. I, on the other hand, have many songs in my mind, some as yet unwritten. Take one of those. Then it will be yours and yours alone."

That would be satisfactory, Ilsensine replied. Come forward.

Jedidiah handed Joel his light stone, then stepped toward Ilsensine. The illithid god raised one of its short tentacles

and stroked the older man's forehead. Jedidiah flinched, but whether from fear or pain, Joel could not tell.

Then in an instant the tentacle pulled backward and lashed forward, burying itself inside Jedidiah's head like an arrow. Jedidiah gasped.

Joel shouted and tried to leap to his god's defense, but three zombie grell lashed their tentacles around his arms and legs and held him fast. The young bard struggled furiously, horrified that Jedidiah might be harmed. He shouted for Ilsensine to leave the priest be, to take something from his own mind instead. The illithid god made no reply, but the grell tentacles tightened painfully about his limbs. With a sense of futility and despair, Joel went limp.

After a minute, Ilsensine withdrew the tentacle from Jedidiah's head. To Joel's relief, there seemed to be no wound. On the tip of the tentacle was a smear of pink, like raspberry jam. Ilsensine pulled it back toward its brain and smeared it into a fissure between two throbbing convolutions.

Joel felt a sigh in his mind . . . Ilsensine's sigh.

Mmmm. That is good. Very good.

Jedidiah collapsed to the floor in a heap.

"What have you done?" Joel cried out, struggling again in the grell's tentacles.

There is no need for alarm. He is not seriously injured. He will recover. We are most pleased. You have earned your freedom. My servants will escort you to the borders of our realm. Where will you be heading?

"The Palace of Judgment," Joel said, his eyes straining for some sign of movement from Jedidiah.

You will like it there. It is very beautiful. At least, that is what I have tasted in the minds of humans who have visited there.

A zombie grell scooped up Jedidiah's fallen form and floated from the hall. The grell holding Joel released him. The Rebel Bard followed after his god. Two grell followed him.

The grell carrying Jedidiah led the party through a glowing portal. On the other side was a straight passageway that climbed back to the daylight surface of the Outlands. After the cool, dark corridors, the bright sky, with or without a sun, was a pleasure to see, and the air felt gloriously warm. Even better was the quiet that settled in Joel's head.

The grell set down Jedidiah and disappeared back into the dark tunnel in the earth.

Joel rushed to Jedidiah's side and shook him by the shoulders, calling out his name. The god remained unconscious, and he was very pale, but at least his breathing was steady. Joel rolled his cape up to pillow the older man's head.

Joel surveyed the land. He stood on a low bluff looking out over a great level plain. From the center of the plain rose a great city, laid out in perfect order, surrounded by a high wall. Everything was built of the same uniform red brick. The roofs all sparkled with glazed yellow tile. The streets were all paved with gray stone. Joel could see at least three large gardens, each growing around a blue lake. Even from this distance, the young priest was inclined to agree with Ilsensine— or, rather, with the victims whose minds the god had drained. The Palace of Judgment was indeed beautiful.

Yet the palace was only a stepping stone to Sigil. He and Jedidiah would have to reach the City of Doors quickly. If they didn't find the Hand of Bane before Walinda did, they would have nothing to barter for the stolen half of the finder's stone. Finder would remain a very weak god for a long time, and Bane the Tyrant would return to the Realms.

Joel shuddered. He knelt down beside Jedidiah, shook him gently, and called out his name—his real name this time.

The older priest woke with a start. He smiled up at Joel. "Lo," he said.

"Hello yourself," Joel replied with a grin, relief flooding over him.

"Been sleeping long, have I?" Jedidiah asked. He sounded like an invalid recovering from a long illness.

"Not too long," Joel answered. He helped his god sit up.

Jedidiah's head twitched involuntarily. It was a movement Joel had never seen before.

"Are you all right?" Joel asked Jedidiah.

"I'm not sure," the older bard said. "They have a saying in the Outlands: 'One would be wise to question the wits of anyone who makes it back alive from Ilsensine's court.'"

"You should have let Ilsensine take a song from me," Joel chided. "I must have known something it had never heard."

Jedidiah shook his head. "It was too great a risk."

Joel chuckled. "And Grypht warned me what a reckless fellow you are."

Jedidiah smiled. "Well, I am. I'm the kind of fellow who climbs to the top of a high wall and dances a jig. But I never intend to fall from the wall and break my neck. You might have known a song that Ilsensine had never heard—one of your own that you haven't performed yet. But then instead of leaving you completely brain-burned, Ilsensine would have only left you addled. No. I stood a better chance of resisting its probe."

"Why didn't Ilsensine just keep us and drain us?"

"Have you ever eaten crab?" Jedidiah asked.

Joel looked completely confused by the question.

"Some people enjoy cracking the crab and getting the meat piece by laborious piece. Ilsensine prefers to have the crab shell itself and hand its meat over. Just one of its sick games. Not one you want to play, believe me."

"Do you know what song it took? Did it take only one?"

"I can't remember," Jedidiah said, his face drawn. "I can feel there's a void, but I don't know what was there."

Joel nodded. "I'm sorry. I know how you feel about your songs. They're like your children. You want them to live and flourish. Now one of them is gone forever."

Jedidiah looked out across the plain toward the Palace of Judgment. A look of grief swept across his face. "It wouldn't be the first time," he said. He stood up awkwardly. "Let's go," he said.

Fourteen

The Palace Of Judgment

After so much time in the wilderness, the crush of humanity approaching the Palace of Judgment was jarring. A steady stream of travelers moved along the paved road toward the palace gates. They all seemed to be traveling on foot. Some were empty-handed, while others carried small sacks of food and belongings. They were all pale, like ghosts. Almost all had dark hair and unusual eyes. There was no traffic headed in the opposite direction. "They look like the Tuigan Horde," Joel joked. "Not so loud," Jedidiah admonished him. "These are the dead of Kara-Tur. The Tuigans invaded their lands as well. Comparisons between the two peoples would be considered a grave insult. The Kara-Tur consider the Tuigans barbarians. Of course, the Kara-Tur consider all outsiders to be barbarians, from the king of Cormyr to the sage of Shadowdale."

They stepped into the stream of traffic and approached the gate amongst the orderly dead. Standing to one side of the gate, outside the walls, stood one of the living. Walinda of Bane was examining each traveler who approached the gates. The two living priests stood out among the crowd, and the priestess recognized them only a moment after they spotted her. She hurried toward them.

"My master said you would arrive soon," the priestess said as she took a place beside them on the road.

On one hand, Joel was relieved to see that the priestess hadn't gotten to Sigil before them. On the other hand, he wasn't about to forgive her for abandoning them. "What are

you doing here?" the bard asked. "Did the banelich kick you out of his chariot?"

"My master has gone on to the astral plane to search for Bane's body," the priestess replied coolly. "In the meantime, I have been instructed to oversee the hand's recovery."

"You left us behind in Ilsensine's realm," Joel accused her.

"What difference does it make? You escaped. You are alive and unscathed, as far as I can see."

"No thanks to you," Joel retorted.

"And I escaped from the Temple in the Sky without your help," Walinda reminded him.

Joel was silenced.

"But you can't get into the palace without our help, can you?" Jedidiah taunted. "I guess I forgot to mention that entry to living creatures is rather restricted."

Walinda's face reddened, and she glared coldly at Jedidiah.

Like a dramatic tour guide, Jedidiah waved his arm to indicate the palace. "All the dead of Kara-Tur," the priest explained, "come here to be judged by the Celestial Bureaucracy and sent on to the plane for which the deeds and misdeeds of their lives suited them. That's why there are gates to every plane here. It is also a place of great order. All who serve within report to a bureaucrat, who in turn reports to a higher bureaucrat, who reports to an even higher bureaucrat, who reports to Yen-Wang-Yeh, Illustrious Magistrate of the Dead, the sole ruling power here. His law is enforced by General Pien and his army of men-shen and go-zu-oni. The gods of Kara-Tur, good or evil, orderly or chaotic, and all those in between rely on this part of the Celestial Bureaucracy to provide them with the inhabitants of their realms. Not one would dare disrupt the business that takes place here. So the palace is also a place where powers and their ambassadors can meet to parlay and exchange prisoners. The powers of other pantheons also meet here, knowing that General Pien and his forces would instantly

squelch any disorder." "If my master had a fortress such as this, plus all these dead at his command," Walinda said, "he could rule the Realms."

"So could Yen-Wang-Yeh," Jedidiah replied. "But there is nothing in the Realms he desires. All the gods of the Kara-Tur, even the evil and chaotic ones, have a place in the Celestial Bureaucracy and duties to perform. To step out of one's place, to fail in one's duty, would bring dishonor."

"What is dishonor when one has power?" Walinda declared.

"Of course," Jedidiah replied, "if your master had Yen-Wang-Yeh's position and his honor wasn't enough to keep him performing his assigned duties, it would all be over at the end of the year. The Celestial Emperor would call on him to make his report, judge him bereft of his duties, and boot him out. Someone else would be assigned to his position. Your master would be without a job.... Well, here we are."

They'd reached the iron gate in the wall surrounding the palace. The gate stood wide open, but standing in the gateway, serving as guards, were a number of fearsome, bull-headed creatures that stood over eight feet tall. Some were orange, some gray, some purple. They wore polished armor and ornate robes and were armed with swords and spears.

"Those are the go-zu-oni," Jedidiah whispered. "Don't ever get them mad at you."

The go-zu-oni guards addressed each arrival in a tongue Joel had never heard and pointed out where they should go. One of the bull-headed creatures stepped in front of Jedidiah and addressed him in short bursts in the same foreign tongue.

Jedidiah bowed low and held out a strip of copper engraved with symbols and characters Joel could not identify.

The go-zu-oni took the strip of metal, examined it briefly, and said something else to Jedidiah, then handed back the

strip of metal.

Jedidiah bowed again, then instructed the others, "Follow me."

They stepped through the gate. A few paces inside, beyond the press of the crowd, Jedidiah halted. His companions stopped beside him.

"Lo," Jedidiah said, gesturing with his arm. "The Palace of Judgement."

Joel looked at the scene that lay before them. The palace was the size of a city, with thousands of buildings. Unlike a typical city, everything was orderly. Every building was constructed of red brick and stone, and the people moving between the buildings did so in an orderly fashion. There was bustle, but no pushing or shoving or disturbances. There were throngs of the dead in the entry courtyard waiting to enter different buildings, guarded by the go-zu-oni, yet the spacious courtyard still seemed almost empty. Joel guessed the courtyard could have held more than a few armies. Officials dressed in brightly colored robes carried armfuls of scrolls from building to building. Joel spotted a party of tanar'ri and another of baatezu arguing heatedly, but not fighting. A creature like an elephant standing on its hind legs stood addressing a pair of foxes, who also stood on their hind legs. Everything about the scene suggested duty and harmony. Joel stood in silent awe.

"Have we stopped for a reason?" Walinda asked.

Jedidiah chuckled. "No. No reason. Let's go, Joel." The older priest led them across the courtyard to the far right. They climbed a stair, passed through the archway of a building, and came out beneath an archway on the other side. Then they descended another set of stairs into a smaller courtyard. There, across the courtyard, stood a building with four staircases leading up to four arched doorways. Intelligent beings stood in four separate lines leading from the doorways, down the stairs, and out into the courtyard. Most of the beings were human, but there were

many nonhumans as well, from centaurlike creatures with ram's horns on their heads to odd creatures that looked like metallic boxes with legs. Some of the beings chatted amicably with others in line, some slouched or griped impatiently, while still others stared straight ahead with blank expressions.

"Pick a line," Jedidiah told Walinda. "Of course, with your karma, any line you pick is going to be the one that moves the slowest."

"Why must we get in line?" Walinda asked.

"Because all these people want what you want, to fill out the proper forms to gain an interview with a bureaucrat who will grant them permission to appear before the tribunal that determines whether or not to recommend to Yen-Wang-Yeh's staff that they be allowed to use one of the portals. Since you're not from Kara-tur, and you're not dead, you'll need special permission. Don't cause any trouble while you're waiting. Courtesy is everything to these people. Should you offend someone who turns out to be married to the cousin of the mother of the official we may later have to deal with, then we could end up waiting in lines until Gehenna freezes over."

A palanquin carried by four go-zu-oni lumbered past them. Reclining on the heavily scented pillows within the box was a horse-headed creature. Human servants ran before the conveyance strewing rose petals at the go-zu-oni's feet, and others who followed behind gathered the petals back up.

"Who was that?" Joel asked.

"Some general of the animal kingdom whose mother got him his post," Jedidiah muttered.

"What are you going to do while I'm waiting?" Walinda demanded impatiently.

"I?" Jedidiah asked with a shocked expression. "I will be finding a contact so you don't have to wait in line. If all goes well, we'll be in Sigil before the end of the week. Come

along, Joel," he said, turning and heading back up the staircase the way they'd come.

Joel hurried after his god, following him through the hallways of another building, down another staircase, through another courtyard, through another building, then out a moon-shaped door onto a balcony overlooking a garden courtyard with a small pond. Joel dallied at the rail of the balcony, as he was sure one was meant to do, to take in the beauty of the garden and admire the serenity of the scene. Bees buzzed among the gardenias, carp glided through the water, and birds twittered in the trees.

"Dawdle later," Jedidiah called from behind him. The older priest had circled the balcony and started down a wide staircase into the garden.

Joel hurried down the stairs, but Jedidiah held him back on the landing between the first flight of stairs and the second.

Eight identical bronze statues, covered in a green patina, flanked the staircase. The statues resembled some creature half-way between a dog and a lion. Jedidiah rapped sharply on the third lion-dog on the right. A hollow clank rang out into the courtyard.

A pale green light began to glow in the lion-dog's eyes. "Finder!" a voice cried out from inside the bronze statue. "You've come back to visit!"

"Just a short visit, Shishi," the older priest replied. "We're just passing through."

"Pooh," the voice inside the lion-dog pouted. "You're always just passing through. I suppose you want help."

Tin too old to wait in line, Shishi," Jedidiah said with a tired smile, "and too impatient. I need three passes to Sigil." "Ah. Not the usual destination of the dead. This may take a while. Will you sing for me tonight, Finder?" Shishi asked.

"You know I will. Oh, but while I'm here, my name is Jedidiah—a priest of Finder."

The light in the lion-dog's eyes blinked, giving the illusion that the statue blinked. "But you still look like Finder!" the voice said. "What sort of western custom is this?"

"Humor an old barbarian," Jedidiah implored, patting the lion-dog's metal head. "I'll be waiting in the garden."

The green light in the lion-dog's eyes faded.

Jedidiah motioned to Joel with a jerk of his head, and together they walked down into the garden. They crossed a tiny bridge to an island in the center of the pond and sat on a bench in a pavilion overlooking the water.

"In case you hadn't guessed," Jedidiah explained, "Shishi is a spirit of a lion-dog. Even though he can't actually drink, he's a big fan of drinking songs of the western Realms. Gods only know why."

"Are you one of the gods who knows why?" Joel asked.

Jedidiah chuckled and shook his head.

"He'll keep me up until dawn singing for him and four hundred of his equally invisible friends. Still, it beats waiting in line."

An old woman in orange pants and robe came across the bridge and set down a tray just outside the pavilion. She bowed low to Jedidiah, then recrossed the bridge and disappeared behind a tree.

The tray held a pot of green tea, two cups, and a plate of almond cookies.

"Shishi is also a perfect host," Jedidiah said.

They took their tea in companionable silence, but when they'd finished, Jedidiah stood up and began pacing. His head twitched once, the way it had shortly after they'd left Ilsensine's realm.

"Are you all right?" Joel asked.

Jedidiah shrugged. "I don't know. It seems to me I had an idea, a plan, but I don't remember it now. I forgot it before I took note of it, if you get my drift."

Joel nodded. "I do that all the time," he said.

"But you're not a god."

"Oh. Do you think Ilsensine stole it?" Joel asked.

Jedidiah's head twitched again. Then he shrugged. "I just don't remember. It's like a tickle in my brain." He sighed.

"Was it some way to get back the finder's stone without giving up the Hand of Bane?" Joel asked hopefully.

"There's an awful thought."

A small green ball of light zipped across the bridge and hovered before Jedidiah's face—Shishi, Joel supposed. The spirit reminded him a little of the firestars of Daggerdale.

"Chief Stellar Operator Pan Ho will take a bribe for a one-time use of the portal to Sigil," said the lion-dog spirit. "I would suggest something green. We should visit Pan Ho immediately. She's going to lunch within the hour and will be gone for a week."

Jedidiah bent over and plucked a newly blossomed gardenia from a bush. "Lead on, O wise Shishi."

Shishi went zipping back across the bridge, through the garden, and up the staircase. It waited patiently at the top of the steps for Jedidiah and Joel to catch up.

"That spirit is four hundred years my senior, and it still leaves me eating its dust," Jedidiah grumbled.

Miss Pan Ho was a grumpy dumpling of a woman who eyed Jedidiah with some distrust until he presented her with

the gardenia "to brighten the efficient austerity of her office." A small but flawless emerald shimmered in the heart of the flower. Miss Pan Ho sniffed at the flower with a smile on her face. After pocketing the blossom, she rummaged through a drawer filled with keys and drew out a large one made of lead. She handed it to Jedidiah. There was a tiny slip of paper attached to the key, printed with symbols in the Kara-Tur language.

Then Miss Pan Ho locked her drawers and left the room. Throughout the entire exchange, she never said a word

The paper attached to the lead key, Jedidiah explained, instructed the holder of the key that Door Number of the Hall of Confused Dreams was to be locked when people left at noon to eat and rest. The opposite side explained that if anyone found the key it should be slid under the door of Room of the Hall of Confused Dreams.

"So we're supposed to use the key when no one's there and leave it in the room?" Joel guessed.

"Very good," Jedidiah replied. "A little practice and you could master the fine art of bribery, Kara-Tur style. I'll spend the evening with Shishi, then we'll leave for Sigil in the morning."

With Shishi riding on Jedidiah's shoulder, Joel and Jedidiah returned to where Walinda waited. If the lines had moved, it wasn't by more than three feet. Walinda glared all around her with annoyance.

Jedidiah sauntered up to the priestess. "You won't need to wait anymore. I obtained access to the portal from a friend."

"Good," Walinda replied, stepping out of the line.

Almost instantly the line moved up ten feet.

The three adventurers followed Shishi back to his garden.

The old woman who'd served them tea brought them a dinner of fish, pickled cabbage, and something Jedidiah called noodle soup.

After they'd eaten, Shishi assigned them each a tiny room overlooking his garden. Each room held a woven straw mat

with blankets, a wooden pillow, a silk robe, and a low writing table.

Jedidiah announced that he was going off with Shishi to "sing for their supper." Joel offered to accompany him, but Jedidiah suggested quietly that the young bard remain behind in case Walinda needed company.

Joel thought that highly unlikely, since the priestess had remained completely silent throughout the meal, but the young bard nodded in agreement. Immediately after Jedidiah and Shishi left, Walinda retired to her room to rest.

Joel enjoyed the solitude of the garden. With the banelich in another plane, all his worries seemed far away. He tried to compose something on his birdpipes that expressed the harmony he felt in this place of the dead, but jarring notes continued to block the melody. In his head, he knew that this was just the calm before the storm. Sooner than he wished, he and Jedidiah would be confronted with the dilemma of the Hand of Bane. He continued to worry about what choice Jedidiah would make.

When darkness fell upon the garden, the bard retired to his room. He left the door open to the perfumed night air and sat down on his mat. He pulled off his tunic and began unbuttoning his shirt. He wasn't yet tired enough to sleep, but there was nothing else for him to do. He felt suddenly very lonely.

Someone rapped lightly on the wooden frame of his open door. Joel looked up. Walinda stood there, looking as aimless as he felt. She wore nothing but the red silk robe she'd found in her room. She had shed her haughty expression with her armor, and only her facial tattoos and the gem in her forehead served as a reminder of her tyrannical beliefs.

"Do you wish to be alone?" she asked.

"Not really," Joel said with a smile, although the priestess wouldn't have been his first choice of company. "Come on in."

The priestess of Bane slid gracefully into the room. She carried a pottery flask with two small china cups. She set them down on the table and then sat down beside Joel on the mat. She settled to the floor with a little less grace, almost a fall. Joel pulled away a few inches. "What's this?" he asked, nodding at the flask.

"Something to drink," Walinda explained. "It's quite good. Try some."

Joel leaned over and poured a little of the beverage into one of the cups. The liquid was clear and very warm. He brought it up to his lips and sniffed. There was a strong odor of alcohol. He sipped the drink. It was strong and a little acrid.

"Where'd you get this?" the young bard asked.

"The old slave brought it for me," Walinda said. She leaned over and poured herself a full cup.

Joel wondered if Walinda had somehow asked for the drink, or if the servant woman had brought it of her own volition. Of course, there was also the possibility that Jedidiah had recommended to Shishi that it be provided to the priestess.

Walinda held up her cup. "What shall we drink to?" she asked.

Joel thought for a moment. They still didn't have much in common. "To Shishi's hospitality," he suggested.

Walinda nodded and took a drink from her cup. She closed her eyes and exhaled.

Joel took another cautious sip. The beverage was far stronger than anything he was used to drinking.

"What song were you playing in the garden?" Walinda asked.

"I was just trying to compose something. The melody wouldn't come out right."

"Your god is not with you tonight," Walinda said with a knowing nod, leaving her head hanging down so that she stared into her cup.

"You might say that," Joel replied, trying to hide his grin.

The priestess was oblivious to the bard's amusement. "It is worse for me. I have been with Bane, and now his absence is like a rent in my heart."

"I didn't know you could miss abuse," Joel said caustically.

"Bane is the embodiment of power, of strength. For him to allow any to question his authority would be a demonstration of weakness. The feel of his power is like this drink, sharp and strong. When he shared his power with me, I was happy. Now that he is in another plane, cannot call on him for power."

"You can't cast any spells unless he's near?" Joel asked.

"He is strong, but he is only the essence of the god," Walinda explained. "He cannot send his power across the astral void."

"He doesn't know half of what Jedidiah knows about anything. He's just a banelich using you for his own mad schemes."

Walinda set her hand down on Joel's knee and leaned in closer to the young bard. "My lord Bane said you would try to sway my belief in him, Poppin. He knows you are jealous of his power. He is wise as well as powerful." Her fingers tightened on his knee, her nails poking into his flesh. The scent of the wine about her was cloying.

Joel lifted her hand away and set it on the table. "I couldn't care less about his power. You were the one who came in to talk to me," he pointed out. "Could it be that you have your own doubts? Could it be that you're tired of being the slave of a heartless lich?"

Walinda chuckled. "But the banelich does have a heart, Poppin," she confided with a drunken certainty. She slid her hand into his shirt. "He keeps it here in a small silver box." She pressed her fingers against his breastbone and slid her hand along his ribs.

Joel grabbed at her wrist and once again pulled her hand away from his body, then released it.

Walinda jerked her head up and breathed in deeply. "I am prepared to admit," she said with the exaggerated enunciation of an offended drunk, "that the banelich who holds my lord's essence is not perfect. It has its weaknesses. The fool has borne your mentor's insolence because it is afraid we will not succeed without his help. Desperation and fear are weaknesses not to be tolerated." She downed the rest of the drink in her cup and set it down on the table.

"So why are you helping this weak thing become Bane?" Joel asked.

"When Bane is resurrected, the banelich will not matter. I will be Bane's chosen priest," she whispered excitedly. She put both hands on his face and leaned forward.

Joel clenched his jaw, determined to show no reaction to the priestess's kiss. But Walinda did not kiss him. Instead, she bit him on the lower lip, not too hard, but not gently either.

More than a little frightened, Joel grabbed both her wrists and pulled away. "How do you know Bane won't choose the banelich for his priest?" he asked. "Suppose it really is Bane's essence that's desperate and afraid? Suppose you've enslaved yourself to a weak god who is jealous of your own strength? What kind of weak, desperate fool does that make you?"

Walinda stiffened. "My Lord Bane is power and strength. I will not tolerate your blasphemy." She rose unsteadily to her feet and strode to the door, bumping her shin on the table as she passed. She turned in the doorway. "My only foolishness was expecting you might wish to share in my triumph. When we find the Hand of Bane, you will witness my god's resurrection and see me exalted as his most loyal servant. Then you will know what true power is. I will ask Lord Bane to take you to your god, Poppin, so that you may see what a poor, cheap thing your Finder is beside my lord."

Then she spun about and strode out the door toward her own room.

Joel picked up his cup and held it up. "Here's to you, Finder, you poor, cheap thing," he toasted, then drained the cup. Finder, he knew, would laugh at the irony.

Joel couldn't remember falling asleep. He awoke in a dark place, with a throbbing headache, and realized he was bound hand and foot and slung over the shoulder of some great monster. His insides churned, and he heaved the contents of his dinner and Walinda's liquor down his captor's back.

The creature growled some unknown word, no doubt a curse, and set Joel down, none too gently, on the ground. A lamp shone somewhere in the distance, silhouetting Joel's captor. The bard gasped. The monster was one of the bull-headed soldiers of the Celestial Bureaucracy, a go-zu-oni. The bard wracked his aching head trying to figure out what had happened, why he was being carried off.

The go-zu-oni pulled off its cloak and wiped off the garment with the bottom of Joel's shirt. Joel cried out, and the go-zu-oni stuffed a rag in his mouth, then swung him back over its shoulder.

Joel couldn't see where he was or where they were going. He was having trouble breathing and only wished that the go-zu-oni would set him down again soon. Joel passed out.

He regained consciousness to the sensation of ice-cold fingers stroking his face. He was lying on the ground. Someone holding a lantern hovered over him. Joel squinted in the light, trying to make out the someone's face.

"Yes. This is the one," a familiar voice said.

Joel's eyes widened. It was the banelich who held the lantern. The undead creature's lipless smile, which exposed its brown teeth and yellow tongue, was horrible to see. The young bard shuddered.

The banelich set the lamp on the ground and turned away from Joel to address the go-zu-oni who stood behind him. "You've done well."

"Now you will pay me what you promised," the go-zu-oni demanded.

"Accept your reward," the banelich whispered and reached out to touch the giant creature.

The go-zu-oni gasped and fell to the ground, its face very near Joel's. The creature's eyes were open but unblinking. Blood ran from its mouth, nose, and ears. The banelich had killed it with a touch.

The undead creature bent over Joel again and grabbed a fistful of his hair. Joel tried to wriggle away, but the banelich held him fast. "Now we will see what sort of fool your master is," it said. "I believe he will do anything to purchase your worthless life."

The banelich whispered an unknown word, and a black aura surrounded the fingers of its free hand. It brushed aside Joel's shirt and lay its hand on the bard's chest near his heart.

A searing cold tingled over Joel's flesh, and an agonizing pain shot through his lungs and heart. Joel's scream was stifled by the rag in his mouth.

"I need you alive," the banelich said, "but you must pay for your master's insolence.

Unable to respond, Joel glared up at the undead monster with hatred.

"Yes," the banelich said, removing its hand. "You think you are strong. Torturing you will be delightful. Then I will trade you for the Hand of Bane and still keep your master's stone." The banelich stood up. "I must write your precious Jedidiah a note. When I return, we will journey to the astral plane."

The banelich picked up the lantern and strode \$ leaving Joel in the dark. Joel heard the clang of a metal door, then silence.

The chill in Joel's chest was unbearable. He laid his bound hands over his heart, desperate for warmth. He couldn't let the banelich use him to force Jedidiah's surrender of the

Hand of Bane. He had to escape, but how? What could he do?

It took him several moments to gather his wits, but finally it occurred to him that first he needed to escape the pain, and to do that he had to cast a spell. That, in turn, meant he must be able to speak. It took him what seemed like an interminably long time to push the rag out of his mouth with his tongue, but he finally succeeded.

He gasped for air, then hastily murmured a healing prayer. Warmth spread across his chest and the pain subsided. Now he was able to think more clearly.

He needed to free himself from his bonds. He wriggled over beside the go-zu-oni's body and, in the dark, began feeling around the creature for a weapon. Joel could find no sharp-edged weapon on the monster. Its body was colder than its armor.

Metal armor can be heated, Joel thought, remembering the spell Jedidiah had taught him. Concentrating on the go-zu-oni's spiked helmet, Joel whispered the words that would warm the metal to a searing red heat.

The stench from the go-zu-oni's hair was awful, but Joel managed to burn away the sisal rope at his wrists and ankles without burning his own flesh too badly. Then he crawled in the direction of the door.

He found the door in the dark. There was no light coming from under or over the door or through the keyhole. Joel put his ear to the door. No sound came from beyond. With no clue to guide him, the bard's only choice was to risk it.

Joel stood up and turned the door handle. The handle turned easily. The door opened soundlessly. Only darkness lay beyond.

With his heart pounding, Joel stepped through the doorway. There was no alarm. He slid along the wall until he spotted a light, not a red light like the lich's lantern emitted, but a bright magical light with a blue tinge. Joel followed the glow.

Suddenly he found himself in the streets of the palace, surrounded by unrecognizable buildings. The blue light came from an iron lamppost. Joel began running through the streets without a clue where he was heading but determined to get as far as possible from the banelich.

He heard footsteps following behind him, and he ran faster. He missed a step down into a courtyard and landed sprawled out on his hands and knees. The footsteps grew closer.

Joel shouted and rolled over. Shishi's servant, the old woman in orange pants and robe, stood over him, hissing furiously with her finger over her lips.

Joel grew instantly quiet. The old woman helped him to his feet, then motioned for him to follow. The bard hurried after her as she led him through a maze of passages and streets until they had once again reached Shishi's garden.

Joel rushed into Walinda's room, but the priestess was out cold, sleeping off the effects of the beverage she'd served him. Joel could smell it all about her. She didn't appear to have had anything to do with her master's plan, but she must have known the banelich hadn't gone to the astral plane—unless the undead creature had left, then returned to arrange Joel's abduction.

Joel turned away from the priestess in disgust. He would question her later. Right now he felt sick and exhausted. The old servant stood outside Walinda's door. On either side of her stood two lion-dogs, not spirits or metallic statues, but flesh-and-blood beasts with sharp teeth and rippling muscles.

"Rest," the servant said. "You have nothing to fear now. You will not be disturbed again."

Joel bowed his thanks and slid into his own room. He fell to the mat and was asleep within minutes.

Jedidiah slid Joel's door open as the Rebel Bard was finishing dressing. "Good morning," the god greeted him

with a look of concern on his face. "I understand you had some excitement here last night."

Joel nodded. He told Jedidiah all he remembered about his abduction. Jedidiah's face colored with anger as Joel spoke, but the god listened without comment until Joel finished.

"I was a fool not to expect some treachery from the banelich," Jedidiah said. "I felt safe leaving you alone in Shishi's quarters. Poor Shishi is beside himself with shame that this happened to you while you were his guest. He's called in several favors. The powers-that-be are turning the palace inside out searching for the banelich. The go-zu-oni are desperate to prove their honor in the wake of the shame that one of them was bribed. They're also eager to avenge their comrade's death. If the banelich hasn't fled to the astral plane by now, he's in big trouble. As for Walinda—"

"I'm not sure Walinda had anything to do with it," Joel said. "She seemed really drunk last night . . . but maybe she's just a good actress. Maybe she brought that liquor over intending to get me drunk so the go-zu-oni could carry me off."

The liquor was my fault," Jedidiah admitted. "I asked Shishi to provide her with some. I sensed she would be amenable to a little bottled warmth. I hoped she might be having a crisis of faith and would admit it to you in a weak moment."

Joel shook his head. "No such luck. She wanted someone to stand beside her in awe of Bane's power, to share her triumph with a little celebration. I suggested that Bane—the real thing, not the lich—might be a desperate coward, and she stalked off. If the door didn't slide, she would probably have slammed it behind her."

"You don't think maybe she overreacted for a reason?" Jedidiah asked.

"Because she knew the banelich was listening?" Joel asked.

"No," Jedidiah replied. "Because she secretly suspects that Bane may not be all she hopes for."

Joel had to mull that one over for a minute. "I'm not sure," he said finally. "I just can't understand why she tolerates the banelich's treatment of her."

"If it really holds the essence of Bane, the banelich makes her feel strong, despite its abuse of her. When we first met the banelich, remember how it painwracked Jas and Holly, but you managed to stand against its power?"

Joel nodded with understanding. "I looked at you and felt strong," he said. "But I didn't know you were a god then."

"It doesn't matter," Jedidiah said. "You took strength from my presence. Walinda would feel the same in her god's presence."

"Maybe she just thinks she's stronger," Joel said. "She mentioned that Bane couldn't grant her spells when the banelich was in the astral plane," Joel said. "You don't suppose that Bane has never been the one to grant her spells, do you? Isn't there some spell that allows a priest to give spells to someone who isn't a priest?"

"Yes," Jedidiah said. "But that still leaves the question of who's giving the banelich its own spells."

"I hadn't thought of that," Joel said.

"Walinda's still sleeping. Let's go out in the garden for breakfast," Jedidiah said.

Joel followed Jedidiah into the garden. On the little island in the middle of the pond, someone had set a tray with bread and honey and milk and berries. After they had eaten, Joel related in detail his conversation with Walinda. When he mentioned Walinda's comment about the banelich keeping its heart in a silver box, Jedidiah sat straight up and his eyes widened. A low whistle escaped his lips.

"I never imagined just how crazy the banelich really was," Jedidiah said.

"Why? What does the silver box mean?" Joel asked.

"It's his phylactery," Jedidiah explained. "It holds a lich's immortality. A lich usually keeps it hidden carefully away. If you destroy a lich's body, it reforms in a day or so around the phylactery. The only way to really kill the lich is to destroy its phylactery. By carrying it with him, the lich is taking a tremendous risk. If he's killed, he won't be able to come back."

"Then it would be easy to kill him?" Joel asked excitedly.

Jedidiah shook his head. "A phylactery explodes when it's destroyed. Kills anyone near it. It would definitely destroy the finder's stone. The lich is so arrogant about its power, it doesn't believe anyone would dare attack it."

"Or it could just be too paranoid to give the phylactery to Walinda," Joel supposed.

Jedidiah nodded. "It wants her completely enslaved to its will. We were talking about the strength Walinda feels when she's near the lich. I think her longing for that strength is one of the reasons the banelich insisted on sending her with us," the older priest said. "Despite the talk about her 'supervising' us, it has to know she's no match for the two of us should we decide to take the upper hand. It's relying on her desire for Bane's presence to strengthen her loyalty. Of course, it's playing a dangerous game, risking her soul with heretics like us."

"Why?" Joel asked.

"Not being a god, the banelich can't feel it, but the strengthening cuts both ways. Walinda can strengthen Bane with her devotion. Without it, the resurrected god will be weakened."

Joel looked up at Jedidiah curiously. "Do you feel strengthened by my devotion?"

Jedidiah nodded. "They say that every time someone mentions a god's name, whether in curse or in prayer, he is strengthened. Without his name being spoken, a god fades. But the prayers of the faithful, particularly the prayers of a priest, are much more important. And when those prayers

come from the god's chosen priests, that brings a special power." Jedidiah paused and looked out over the water. "That's why I had to stand up to the banelich in the desert when you called on me," he continued, "even though you used my false name. The strength you made me feel was something my heart couldn't deny, even though my reason told me I was taking a tremendous risk."

"Didn't you care about Jas or Holly?" Joel asked with a stab of irritation.

"Yes, but not enough to risk you. That's why I'm going to Sigil with you, because I can't bear to risk having you going in alone."

"How will you be able to do that?" Joel asked, suddenly uneasy, remembering that Jedidiah had said he had a reckless trick that might get him into the City of Doors.

"First do me a favor. Sing me the tulip song."

Joel's scrunched his face up in confusion.

"Humor me," Jedidiah asked.

The Rebel Bard sighed. He cleared his throat. Then he sang, no longer hesitating over the oddness of the tune or the words. He sang the song with confidence from beginning to end.

"Excellent," Jedidiah said. He stepped out of the pavilion and pulled the saurial's half of the finder's stone from his boot.

Jedidiah uttered some words completely unknown to Joel. Then he began singing a scale, each note perfect and distinct, his voice rising over and over again. As he sang, his body began to steam, just as it had when Joel had watched him store his power into his own half of the finder's stone. Now, instead of blue, the steam was a myriad of colors, ranging through the whole spectrum, as if a rainbow were flowing from his body and being sucked up by the stone.

Joel watched in fascination until Jedidiah swayed and nearly fell forward into the pond. The young bard leapt up and steadied his god with his hands on his arms. Jedidiah

looked exhausted. He also looked old—not as old as when Joel had first met him, but older than he had appeared moments ago. There was something else odd about him. Somehow, to the young priest, he no longer seemed like Finder.

'Jedidiah," Joel asked in a frightened whisper, "what did you just do?"

"Since gods can't get into Sigil, I stopped being a god," the old man explained. "Remember when I told you that the stolen half of the finder's stone holds the power that give me the godly abilities to sense what's going on around me, and around you, and the ability to teleport and to cast any spell?"

Joel nodded.

Jedidiah held up the finder's stone. "Well, now this half of the stone contains the power to use all the abilities that I had left—all my remaining godly endowments: my ability to grant you spells, my ability to shapeshift, even my immortality. Now I should be able to get into Sigil... I hope."

"But—but—" Joel stammered, "how could you be so reckless? What if something happens to you? You could die!"

"Well, let's hope it doesn't come to that," Jedidiah said. "But if it does, then this can help you to resurrect me. Just as the Hand of Bane can restore Bane, this stone will restore me. You and Copperbloom must take the stone to the astral plane, find my body, and sing the song for my rebirth."

"Why couldn't you just let me go to Sigil alone with Walinda?" Joel asked in exasperation. He pulled his hands away from Jedidiah's arms. "Don't you think I can handle the job?"

"Joel, there are going to be protections around the Hand of Bane. Some guardian, probably several. That's why Bane needs us to get it. Why risk his priestess's life when he can risk mine or yours? And besides that danger, you'd still have Walinda to contend with. She's a vicious, selfish woman, determined to have her way. She maybe without spells, but she is by no means powerless. She would arrange some way

to keep you for herself whether you were willing or not. Or if Bane requested it, she would relish sacrificing you, in the most horrible manner imaginable, to gain his favor."

"But you're mortal now. You're taking the same risks," Joel argued.

Jedidiah's shoulders sagged like a beaten man. Ten years ago, when I became a god, all I really wanted was immortality. Well, immortality plus eternal youth. I hadn't planned on becoming a god. It just happened. I'm not saying I wasn't pleased, but until that moment in the desert when you called on me, I'd never really understood what being a god meant. Joel, there isn't any point in my being a god without you. Not to me"

Joel looked down, embarrassed by Jedidiah's confession.

"Anyway, now we travel just as friends," Jedidiah said. "I hope."

Joel looked up and smiled. "Always," he said.

Jedidiah held out the finder's stone. "You have to carry this now. I trust you to do a better job holding on to it than I did holding on to the other half."

Joel took the stone. It felt warm to the touch. Inside, a tiny light seemed to pulse with a life of its own. Joel tucked the stone into his shirt. He and Jedidiah spent the rest of the morning singing songs in the garden.

Walinda woke shortly before it was time for them to leave. If she was surprised to see Joel, she didn't show it. At Jedidiah's suggestion, they made no mention of the abduction.

Shishi accompanied them to the Hall of Confused Dreams, where they would find the portal to Sigil. Walinda was quiet and sullen, as if she really were suffering from a hangover.

As they approached the door to Room , Jedidiah drew out the key he'd bribed from Miss Pan Ho. He unlocked the door. The room was empty save for a shimmering gray portal against one wall.

Shishi blinked by the doorway. "Thanks for the songs, Finder," the spirit said. "Er—priest of Finder," he added quickly.

Walinda, her eyes closed, appeared oblivious to the exchange.

"Farewell, Shishi. Until we meet again," Jedidiah said, bowing to the lion-dog spirit.

Shishi twinkled once, then zipped away.

Jedidiah shut the door and locked it, leaving the key on the floor just before the door. Then he turned about to face the magical portal to Sigil. He motioned for Walinda to step through first.

The priestess disappeared in the portal as if she had been swallowed by quicksand.

"Let me go through next," Jedidiah said, "just so I'm sure you're not there alone with Walinda, in case I can't get through."

Joel nodded. Jedidiah stepped through the portal and disappeared just as Walinda had.

The Rebel Bard took a deep breath and followed his Mend through the doorway into the city of Sigil.

Fifteen Sigil

The three questing adventurers found themselves on a sandstone-paved street between two rows of dingy, cramped stone houses with iron bars covering the windows. The wall from which they emerged was covered with a collage of tattered paper sheets, each imploring the reader to purchase some item or other for reasons of health, wealth, or love. Joel placed his hand on the wall and discovered that it was solid from this side. That was just as well, since the chaos all around them had no place in the Palace of Judgment. People and creatures of all sorts bustled through the streets on foot or in sedan chairs, or even a few in carriages drawn by

haggard, long-eared ponies. None of the passersby seemed to take any care to avoid any of the other living obstacles in their way. They simply shoved through the crowd or ran it down.

More disturbing than the rudeness of its citizens was the city's air. While the air of the Outlands had seemed to Joel fresh and new, the air of Sigil tasted used and thin, as if breathed by a million lungs and tainted by a hundred diseases. Scents of every sort assailed Joel's nose: food, sweat, sewage, smoke ... mostly smoke. The light fog hanging in the air was gray with smoke. Joel found it necessary to breathe twice as fast as normal. Jedidiah tried to take a deep breath and was caught up in a coughing fit.

Walinda, apparently oblivious to the foul air, was looking at the buildings that surrounded them. "Everything is leaning in toward us," the priestess remarked.

Joel and Jedidiah surveyed the street. Indeed, everything did seem to tilt in their direction, as if they were in the bottom of a great bowl. Joel realized they were inside a torus—the ring they had seen from the Outlands. The city of Sigil curled up around them wherever they were, and the buildings that were built perpendicular to the inner surface of the torus would always look tilted unless the visitors were standing inside the buildings or very near to them. Joel looked straight up, hoping to see the part of the city that must hang above them, but the fog obscured the view in every direction.

The passersby, mostly cloaked and hooded against the chill of the air, completely ignored them—except for one. A blue-skinned elf with pointed teeth, wearing a cloak with great padded shoulders, sidled up beside Joel. "Core, guv'nor. Yer orbing the scenery," he said. "You clueless?"

Puzzled, Joel turned and addressed the elf. "Excuse me?"

"Wot, yer barmy?" the elf asked, tilting his head slightly. "I asked if you were clueless, cutter. Newly arrived to the

Cage. Out-of-towner, by the fresh smell on you. Looking for a kip and a bit of a ride, I bet."

The three adventurers exchanged questioning looks.

"Do either of you have magic to understand his tongue?" Walinda asked.

"I don't think a spell would help," Jedidiah grumbled. "This is the local dialect." Passersby continued to ignore them, save for the elf. "Ah! Definitely clueless!" the elf exclaimed, rubbing his hands together. "Fortunately for you lot, I'm a most well-lanned tout and knight of the post in the Cage, which is the native name for Sigil, berk. Top-shelf, I am. Guaranteed to get you where you need to be for a bit of jink or a sparkle. I got maps to all the major portals, the passwords of the best kips, and a full listing of all the factions. Can't tell the Dustmen from the Godsmen without one. I got a special today on holy relics. I got the toenails of Mordenkainen, the eye of Tiamat, the Hand of Bane, and the vortal chiv of Arthur hisself—"

Walinda laughed. "You have the Hand of Bane?" she asked, her tone implying she thought the possibility most improbable.

"Of course," the elf replied, straightening with pride. "It's what every sod in the Cage is hunting for. Got it right in here." He patted a large pouch beneath his cloak. "Let's move to a blind and we can negotiate."

"You'll be in the deadbook if you try that, berks!" a rasping, high-pitched voice cried out. A female dwarf barreled out of a doorway and plodded over to them. "He's in the cross-trade, looking for conies."

The elf wheeled on her. "Bar that! I'm their tout here, and I resent your implication."

The dwarf snorted. "You're just after their jink. Then you'll give 'em the laugh. Besides, everyone knows I have the Hand o' Bane."

Jedidiah raised his eyebrows and glanced at Walinda. The priestess sneered but made no comment.

"Shut yer bone-box!" the elf snapped. "I got the hand. You've got a piece of Vecna. At least that's what you told the last bit of berks you turned stag on."

"Here's the dark of it," the dwarf growled to the elf. "You're on the peel, and peery peel at that. 'I got the Hand of Bane; just step into the alley' indeed. They'd tumble to you in a dabus's heartbeat."

"Scan this, rube," the elf snarled. "These are my conies, and I'm gonna keep 'em. So sod off with that Hand of Bane bob and go to the mazes."

Jedidiah took a step backward. The two natives failed to notice as they continued to argue in their nearly impenetrable native language. He set one hand on Joel's shoulder and the other on Walinda's. Priest and priestess looked back at the older man, who made a backward jerking motion with his head. Joel and Walinda stepped back from the disputing pair. Then all three stepped backward two more steps. Then, as one, the three spun about and stepped into the flow of the pedestrian traffic. Both elf and dwarf remained oblivious to the loss of their would-be customers.

"Where are we headed?" the priestess asked.

"For the moment, we're just heading away," Jedidiah replied. "Stay alert and don't gawk. That's probably what marked us as tourists."

"Any other sage advice?" Walinda retorted sarcastically.

Jedidiah shook his head wearily. "I've never been here before, but an old friend once gave me some pointers. Number one is if a woman wearing cutlery on her head walks towards you, turn and run in the opposite direction."

They walked on for about half a mile, keeping their eyes forward, until the surrounding neighborhood improved. The streets here were free of debris and paved with white granite. The buildings were larger and less tightly squeezed together. The shouts from pedestrians on the streets were less vulgar. The gray fog, however, was just as dense.

"What's this 'Hand o' Bane' look like?" Jedidiah asked Walinda, mimicking the speech of the dwarf.

Walinda's eyes narrowed suspiciously, but after a moment's thought, she said, "I will show you." From inside her breastplate, she pulled out the page she'd stolen from the book in the Temple in the Sky. She unfolded the page and showed it to Joel and Jedidiah. Beneath some writing, in a language Joel could not read, there was a painting of a taloned hand.

"The hand is about twice the size of an average man's hand," Walinda explained. "It is carved from obsidian. The claws are fashioned from pieces of garnet."

"Now that you know what it looks like, try the stone," Jedidiah told Joel. "Look bored and indifferent, as if you're measuring the town for a sewer survey or something."

Joel pulled out the saurials' half of the finder's stone. Walinda stared curiously, realizing it was identical to the half her master held, but she said nothing.

Joel concentrated on the Hand of Bane, and a light beam immediately lanced from the gem off to their right and upward through the fog.

"It must be in a tower," Walinda said.

"Not necessarily," Joel replied. "The beacon could just be following the straightest line to another spot on the curve of the city." He slid the stone back inside his tunic.

They couldn't follow the beam directly, so they meandered along the streets, trying to maintain the same general direction. Often they had to turn in a different direction to avoid buildings or dead ends. Finally they paused before a huge statue of a three-eyed horse surrounded by armed guards.

"Better take another reading," Jedidiah suggested. "We could have gotten turned about some."

They were indeed off the correct heading by several degrees. The angle of the light beam had lowered

considerably—an indication, Joel thought, that they were getting closer. They corrected their direction and walked on.

After they'd passed through what seemed like miles of meandering city streets, Joel drew out the finder's stone again. Now the angle of the beam was not very steep at all.

"We're in the neighborhood," Joel whispered excitedly.

"We're also being followed," Walinda said calmly. "Oh?" Jedidiah replied with a tone of disinterest.

The tall, pale individual in heavy armor," the priestess of Bane said. "Wearing a skullcap helmet and a thin little sword. He's been with us for at least half a mile. To your right."

Joel glanced to his right immediately. Jedidiah was more casual. The individual Walinda mentioned was talking to a fruit merchant, holding up a pear and examining it as if it were a diamond. His skin was as white as moonlight.

"At the next intersection, let's turn left," Jedidiah suggested. "We'll see if we can lose him."

Joel glanced back once they'd made the turn. The pale warrior was still following them. The adventurers increased their speed and turned left once more, then made a dash to the next corner and made yet another left turn.

Joel looked back. "We've lost him," he said.

They had almost reached the street where they'd taken their last reading when the tall, pale man popped around the corner just in front of them. Joel and Walinda started. Even Jedidiah looked surprised by his sudden appearance.

"Excuse my imposition," their stalker said. He was choosing his words slowly, as if he wasn't speaking his native tongue. Besides being inhumanly pale, the man had cat's eyes and unusually long, slender fingers. "Are you priests of Finder or Bane?" he asked.

Jedidiah sighed. He pointed to Joel and himself and said, "We're priests of Finder." Then he indicated Walinda. "She's a priestess of Bane."

The pale man in armor bowed low. "I was told to expect you," he said. "And a fourth one, a dead one?"

"He couldn't make it," Joel answered before Walinda could muddy the issue concerning the lich.

"Very well," the pale man answered. "I am Bors. You are to come with me, please."

"Excuse me," Joel said, "but why are we to come with you, please?" Bors smiled. "She wishes to see you," he explained.

"She?" Joel asked.

"Come. She will explain all," the pale man insisted. "Please."

Joel glanced at his companions. Walinda looked suspicious; Jedidiah merely shrugged.

"Very well," Joel said. "We will come with you, please. Lead us to her, whoever she is." He fell in beside Bors. Jedidiah and Walinda followed.

"I don't like this," the priestess muttered.

"Neither do I," Joel replied, "but if someone knows about us, I'd rather know who and why than not know."

Their new guide led them into an area with wider streets and even larger buildings, surrounded by iron fences. There were no vendors in the streets, and the pedestrians and sedan chairs moved along in a more sedate fashion. It had all the signs of being the neighborhood of the wealthy and noble.

At the door to a modest house, at least compared to those that surrounded it, Bors halted. "She is here," he said.

The three adventurers hesitated before the ornate doorway decorated with stone gargoyles and other monsters. Their guide motioned for them to enter.

"If this is a trick," Walinda whispered, "and we are forced to flee and become separated, I will meet you near the big horse statue."

Joel nodded.

The door swung open suddenly to reveal a familiar figure wearing a bright red robe.

"It's about time you got here. It seems like I've been waiting forever," Holly Harrowslough declared. She smiled at Joel and Jedidiah, ignoring Walinda. "Come on inside and I'll fill you in."

The interior of the parlor into which Holly led them was spartan and neat. The walls were painted a flat white. The mantel and stonework about the fireplace were of white marble. The carpeting was white wool.

The few pieces of furniture in the room were made of light-colored wood. The only splash of color in the room was a painting over the fireplace of a large red sphere, which seemed to hover in front of the wall.

At Holly's invitation, they sat around a low table made of blond ash. Holly sat with them. Bors stood in the doorway.

"This is a Sensate safe house," the paladin said. "Sensates dedicate their lives to living completely in the here and now," she explained. "They're always seeking new sensations, new experiences, new perspectives. They feel it gives them a greater grasp of the world around them. They use this place as a sort of a retreat, a place to cleanse their mental palate between forays into especially intense sensational experiences."

"'Especially intense sensational experiences,' "Jedidiah repeated with a chuckle. "Is that a euphemism for a debauch?"

"No!" Holly protested. "Well . . . yes, sometimes," she corrected herself. "The Sensates aren't just a bunch of hedonists, though. They don't believe in a cynical repetition of the same sensation. But they certainly wouldn't say no to a debauch if they'd never tried one before."

"A fitting place for a paladin of Lathander," Walinda stated, "a god revered for his enthusiastic beginnings, but who never actually accomplishes anything."

Holly's eyes narrowed at Walinda's words, but then she smiled. "You should try it sometime, Walinda," the paladin suggested. "Exploring new sensations can be quite

liberating. From what Jas told me about you, I suspect it might help you grow beyond your pathetic need to be abused and to abuse others in return."

Walinda stared daggers at the girl. "You are a fool," she replied.

"This is fascinating," Jedidiah interrupted before the conversation grew any more hostile, "but you haven't told us how you got here."

"Well, when I arrived I encountered Bors. He's a paladin from another world, but he's made Sigil his home. He's a Sensate. He brought me here. He and his friends have kept a lookout for your arrival."

Joel was more than a little impressed. He had never doubted that Holly was a remarkable girl. Now she seemed even more so. She was vibrant and completely self-assured. Joel also knew her well enough to know that she was being evasive about something.

"But how did you get to Sigil?" the young bard asked. "And what happened to Jas?"

"Jas is fine," Holly said. "I left her in good hands. I got here by a portal, one that brought me straight to Sigil. I can't imagine why you had to go all the way through the Outlands. Bors says that Sigil is full of portals to other worlds."

"The lich wanted to use Cat's Gate," Jedidiah said, "no doubt because it was large enough to accommodate the spelljammer."

"So where's the ship? And where's the lich?" Holly asked.

"We lost the ship," Jedidiah explained. "The lich is in the astral plane, searching for Bane's body. He still has my half of the finder's stone."

"So you're still looking for the Hand of Bane?" Holly asked.

Jedidiah nodded.

"You might have a little problem there," Holly said. "I'm afraid that when I arrived, I was less than discreet in my

initial inquiries. Several of Bors's friends among the Sensates offered to help, since searching for an ancient artifact would be a new experience for them. They took to it a little too enthusiastically, though, and ended up creating a market for Hands of Bane. Now half the thieves of Sigil have at least one Hand of Bane in their inventory. Usually it's the hand of some poor unfortunate they've knifed in the alley."

"You did this to make our task more difficult," Walinda said icily.

"No I didn't," Holly retorted. "Can I help it if I'm just too open and trusting?" Then she smiled slyly. "But I couldn't have come up with a better stratagem if I'd actually planned it. I should warn you, I tried divinations to locate the hand, but had no luck. It must be protected by some special magic. Many of the Sensates who were helping me have given up because they became bored or frustrated with our lack of progress. They did discover an old tiefling who claims that several hundred years ago there was a temple to Bane in the Market Ward, but it's gone now."

"We have a way to track the hand," Jedidiah said. "In the meantime, since Sigil is full of portals, as you say, it would be useful if you could discover for us a portal to the astral plane."

Holly looked to Bors.

"The Shattered Temple," the Sensate paladin said. "The Athar give tours featuring dead gods."

Holly chuckled. "The Athar are mostly disillusioned priests. They spend their time trying to prove the gods aren't divine. Amusing, no?"

"Hilarious," Jedidiah replied, rubbing his temples with his fingertips.

"So how are you tracking the Hand of Bane?" Holly asked. "With the other half of the finder's stone?"

Joel nodded. "Perhaps we should wait until night to continue," the young bard suggested to Jedidiah. "After people are asleep."

"There is no real night here," Holly explained. "Only a period where the smoke turns from light gray to dark gray. There will still be plenty of people out at night. They'll just be a different type."

"Well, we'll wait for the dark gray anyway," Jedidiah said, rising slowly. "Because right now I need some rest."

"I, too, require rest," Walinda said.

Bors showed the priest and priestess to rooms where they could lie down. Joel remained behind with Holly. "Jedidiah doesn't look well," the paladin noted. "He looks like something's sucked all the energy out of him."

"He was up late last night singing," Joel explained, although it was uncanny the way she had actually described exactly what had happened to Jedidiah.

"And Walinda?" Holly asked.

"Walinda had a little too much of some strong Kara-Turan drink," Joel said. He related to Holly their adventures since they'd left her, without, of course, mentioning Finder's loss of godhood. He also left out any mention of his previous evening's conversation with Walinda. Holly, in turn, described to him some of what she had learned about Sigil: its political factions, its geography, its primary places of interest.

Sometime near antipeak, the Sigil midnight, the four Realms adventurers set out with the finder's stone. The stone led them to an alley behind a bookshop on Copperman's Way.

"We're being watched again," Walinda said. "I can feel it."

"We're always being watched," Holly said. "This is Sigil. Watching is the city's favorite pastime, right up there with rat-baiting and cheating customers."

Joel used the finder's stone again in the alley. The beacon of light lanced from the stone straight down to the ground.

"Subterranean tomb, or perhaps a hidden shrine," Jedidiah guessed.

"Or it could have just been buried when they built the road," Holly suggested. "Bors said that they often just build the street up, making first floors into basements and basements into subbasements."

"I would prefer to keep our business out of the public eye," Jedidiah said. "Let's see if we can't find a more private means of excavation than digging in the street."

The four adventurers circled around to the front of the shop. A sign over the front door read, Dits's Books. They entered the front door. There were shelves and shelves of tomes of all sizes. At the moment, the shop was empty of customers.

The proprietor, Bits, was a bariaur, a creature with the body of a mountain sheep and the upper torso of a man, with a ram's horns on his head. He lowered his head and peered at them over the rims of a pair of blue-tinted eyeglasses. "Can I help you?" he inquired.

"Perhaps," Jedidiah said. "We, um, need to dig in your basement. We're willing to pay you for the privilege and for any inconvenience, of course."

"Indeed," the bariaur replied, as if there was nothing very unusual in the man's request. "Why?"

"It's a long story," Joel said.

The bariaur's eyes lit up. "Long stories are my specialty."

Surprisingly, they came to an agreement rather quickly after that. Bits consented to the excavation, provided they paid him a sizable sum of gold and related to him the story behind why they were digging in his basement.

"Why does he need to know the story?" Walinda asked suspiciously. "What difference does it make to him?"

"He's a bookseller," Holly said with a sigh of exasperation. "He probably writes books, too. A good hero's tale is worth a lot of money in Sigil. The populace eats them up, so to speak."

The bariaur led the group down an iron staircase. Jedidiah pulled out a light stone to reveal an empty, windowless

basement with walls of fitted stone and a dirt floor. The finder's stone beacon pointed toward the base of the back wall. Just above the beacon was a black granite archway sealed with mortared red brick.

"I don't come down here often," Bits declared. "It's too damp to store books. Tried renting it to some Anarchists, but they said it was haunted and moved out. Never saw a ghost myself, though I sat here for a few nights waiting for one. Very disappointing."

"We'll need some tools to break through this wall," Jedidiah said.

"I can arrange that," Holly said.

"I will go with you," Walinda added.

"That's all right. I don't need any help," the paladin replied.

"But I need to be sure you are not mustering your hedonist friends to attack us and steal the Hand of Bane for yourself," Walinda retorted.

"Fine," Jedidiah said. "Go. Joel, you can start paying this man by telling him our story."

"What will you be doing?" Joel asked.

"Thinking," the older man replied.

Holly, Walinda, Joel, and Dits climbed back up to the ground-floor level. After Walinda and Holly left the shop, the bariaur led Joel into a back room. The shopkeeper settled himself in a nest of pillows in front of a low writing desk, lifted a quill pen, and poised it over a huge roll of parchment. "Whenever you're ready," he said.

Joel began his tale in Berdusk, explaining how he'd met and become friends with Jedidiah, how he'd become a priest of Finder, and how he'd started out on his pilgrimage to the Lost Vale. He ended with his arrival in Sigil, his reunion with Holly, and their tracking of the Hand of Bane to Dits's basement.

Dits recorded Joel's story word for word, with an amazingly quick hand and in a fluid script. When he'd

caught up with Joel's last words, he stopped and sat back. "There's something missing," Dits said. "Something you're not telling me. I can sense these things."

Joel started. He had, of course, deliberately left out the secret of Jedidiah's true identity and how the half of the finder's stone he now held possessed all the god's remaining powers.

"There are things I can't talk about," the young bard admitted.

"But the story isn't true without them," Dits objected in an annoyed tone. "And it's not finished, either."

"Not yet," Joel agreed.

The bariaur set down his quill and removed his eyeglasses. He bit down on the wire rims encircling the lenses. "I must have all the facts, including the ending," he insisted. "You'll have to come back and tell me what happens to you in the astral plane. You must also tell me what's missing."

Joel thought for a moment. Once they'd taken care of their business with the banelich, Finder's identity would no longer be at risk. The god would once again possess all his powers. "When I get back from the astral plane, I'll tell you what I've left out," he promised Dits.

"Ah. Time-sensitive material. I understand," the bariaur said. "Don't die on me," he said as he blotted the ink on his scroll dry. The parchment he rolled into two halves, the part that held Joel's story and the part that would hold the story's ending and Jedidiah's secret. "Please try to come back alive. I hate it when I have to change narrative voice in the middle of a manuscript. It's very disruptive."

Joel shuddered. It was certainly possible that he might die, he realized. They would have to contend with the banelich in the astral plane. And the banelich wasn't his only worry. Some other fearsome monster must protect the Hand of Bane. Jedidiah might die, too. The bard tried to mentally shake the notion from his head.

The sharp slam of the shop's front door brought Joel and Dits to their feet. Walinda was shouting his name. Her voice sounded terrified.

Jedidiah came running up the steps as Joel and Dits arrived in the front room. Walinda stood at the counter, bent over, gasping for air. She dropped a huge sledgehammer on the floor.

"What's wrong?" Joel asked.

"We were attacked," the priestess said without looking up.

"Who attacked you?" Jedidiah demanded.

Walinda shook her head. "I don't know," she gasped. "It happened in a dark street. Something fell on me from above and clawed at my throat. Holly hit it with her pickax, and it turned on her. I ran here."

"You left Holly behind in the street?" Joel said angrily.

"There was nothing I could do," Walinda protested. "I have no spells."

"You could have hit whatever it was with this sledgehammer," Joel growled, kicking at the tool she'd dropped at her feet.

"It's too heavy to wield accurately. Whatever attacked us was fast and huge. There may have been more than one. It was too dark to tell. I ran all the way here for help," Walinda shouted back.

"Show us where," Jedidiah said grimly. "We'll be back," he told Bits.

The priestess led them to a dark spot in a narrow lane several blocks from the bookshop.

There was no one around. Jedidiah bent over and retrieved a large pickax that lay in the street, the only indication that Holly had ever been there.

"It's taken her!" Joel exclaimed.

"Use the stone," Jedidiah said calmly.

Joel nodded. He pulled out the finder's stone and thought of the paladin. The beacon shone in the direction of the ward

where the Sensate safe house was located.

"She's still alive," Jedidiah declared.

They followed the beacon. It led them right to the Sensate safe house.

Joel dashed inside, shouting the paladin's name.

Holly lay on the white carpet, staining the wool red with her blood. Bors knelt beside her, sewing closed a great gash in the girl's stomach. He used a glowing golden needle that, although unthreaded, left a trace of golden stitches in Holly's flesh. It was a magic Joel had never seen before. Some sort of magic from Sigil, or perhaps from Bors's homeworld, Joel guessed.

The three waited anxiously for the Sensate paladin to finish. When he looked up, Jedidiah asked, "What happened?"

"I heard Holly scream," Bors said. "I saw this one run off" He pointed at Walinda. "Then I found Holly in the street, left for dead."

"You were following us," Walinda declared in an accusatory tone.

"Lucky I was," Bors replied coldly.

"Did you see what attacked them?" Joel asked.

Bors shook his head.

Joel gave the priestess of Bane a suspicious glare.

Sensing what the bard must be thinking, Walinda went on the defensive. "It was not I," she declared. "Look." She showed them claw marks streaking her throat and arms. "Besides, if I had attacked her, I would not have left the job half finished. Use your power to heal her and she will tell you so herself. Perhaps she got a better look at whatever it was."

"We can't heal her," Jedidiah explained. "Finder's power doesn't appear to extend to this place."

Walinda sniffed haughtily. "I told you he was a petty god," she said to Joel.

"At least he's not a dead god," Joel barked back.

Jedidiah knelt beside the girl. "Most of these are superficial cuts, as if whatever it was was just trying to hold Holly back. The belly wound seems the most life-threatening injury, aside from the loss of blood."

Holly moaned softly. Then her eyes blinked open.

"Holly," Joel asked, "are you all right?"

The girl moaned again.

"What attacked you?" Walinda demanded.

"Black thing. Furry, with wings," the young paladin whispered. "Like Bear."

"Bear!" Joel gasped. "That's impossible. We cremated him. Holly, are you sure?"

Holly shook her head. There were tears in her eyes. She turned her head toward Bors and said no more.

"She must rest," Bors insisted. "Yes," Jedidiah agreed. He stood up. "And we must get back to work," he said, taking up the pickax he'd retrieved from the street. "Joel, Walinda, let's go. Bors will look after Holly."

"I will stay," Walinda said.

"What?" Joel asked.

"I have been injured myself," the priestess of Bane said, "and you cannot heal me. I have no spells. I would be more hindrance than help. I will nurse the girl. I am better at causing wounds than healing them, but I do know something of the art."

Jedidiah examined the priestess with a jaundiced eye, but after a moment he nodded. "We'll return when we've found something," he said. Then the older priest wheeled about and headed for the door. Joel followed in his wake.

Joel and Jedidiah walked back toward the Market Ward in the dark fog.

"That was strange, wasn't it?" Joel asked the older man.

"What?" Jedidiah replied.

"Walinda offering to nurse Holly."

"Oh, that. Indeed it was," Jedidiah replied.

"I would have thought she'd want to be there when we found the hand no matter how wounded she was."

"Unless the banelich has warned her that there may be a deadly guardian protecting the hand," Jedidiah pointed out.

"What do you think attacked Holly?"

"I don't think it was Bear. It could be another dark stalker. If the priests of Iyachtu Xvim caught wind of what Walinda was up to, they might have decided to send an agent here to prevent Bane's resurrection. Walinda said the creature attacked her first, and it left Holly once Walinda was gone."

"It left Holly for dead," Joel pointed out.

"But it didn't leave her dead. Did you notice Holly was crying?"

Joel nodded. "She must be in terrible pain."

"She turned her head away," Jedidiah said.

Joel thought about that for a moment. "Do you think she knows something she's not telling us? What could it be?"

"I think we should hurry back to the shop, just in case."

From some shadows off to their right, something hissed. Then, in his head, Joel heard a voice speak their names: Joel. Finder.

Jedidiah was brought up short, apparently having heard the same voice using his real name. Joel halted beside him, his hand on the hilt of his sword.

A figure glided out from behind the curtain of fog. It wore a robe of crimson, ornately trimmed in gold. A red fez with a gold tassel crowned its octopuslike head. It was a mind flayer, what Jas called an illithid, one of Ilsensine's chosen master race.

You are Finder, it stated in their heads.

Joel noticed that the left side of the mind flayer's tentacled face twitched, as if from palsy.

I am a servant of Lord Ilsensine, the illithid explained. Its face twitched some more. We seek a boon from you.

"I have paid my debt to your lord," Jedidiah replied cautiously. "I have no further desire to deal with him."

He needs to deal with you. The mind flayer waved its tentacles anxiously. He begs for your indulgence.

"Begs?" Jedidiah replied with amused surprise. "Why would the greatest mind in the universe need to beg?"

Your song . . . The illithid's face started to twitch faster; the tentacles writhed as if in pain. After a moment the twitching slowed, and the illithid said, Your song. It doesn't end. It keeps on going, and my lord cannot get it out of his mind.

"That's not my problem," Jedidiah said. "He wanted it."

Please take the song back. It is spreading to us,

Ilensine's faithful priests, when we pray for spells. It is driving us mad.

"All sales are final," Jedidiah replied with a chuckle.

My lord says he will grant you a boon, the illithid replied, if you will take the song back. Anything you need to know. Gods have traded one of their eyes for such knowledge.

Jedidiah paused for a moment, then said, "There are two things I need to know."

Agreed, the mind flayer cried out in their heads without hesitation.

"Very well," Jedidiah said.

The mind flayer moved in close to Jedidiah. It extended its facial tentacles. The tips of the tentacles glowed with the same green radiance as Ilensine had. The tentacles stroked Jedidiah's face, then plunged deep beneath the flesh, passing ethereally into his brain. After a moment, they withdrew, leaving Jedidiah's flesh unscarred.

In his head, Joel heard the mind flayer sigh. The creature's palsy had evaporated.

The mind flayer stepped back and bowed deeply. The answer to your first question is no, it said. The answer to your second question .. The creature tilted his head. He does not know. Good-bye, Finder Wyvernspur.

The illithid slid back into the fog, disappearing within moments.

Jedidiah stood staring after it wordlessly, the blood draining from his face. His expression was one of extreme sadness.

"Jedidiah," Joel whispered. "Are you all right?"

The older man nodded, but he appeared distracted.

"What was that all about?" Joel asked.

Jedidiah sighed. He turned to Joel with a wan smile. "Remember in Shishi's garden, when I thought I remembered that I had a plan? I did. I gave Ilsensine a recursive song, a tuneful little ditty in which the last verse leads directly back into the first, forming a closed loop. Ilsensine couldn't get the tune out of his head and with his powerful brain, he couldn't stop thinking about it. Then, his mind power being what it is, it spread to his priests."

Joel thought of the times when he'd been unable to stop humming some silly ditty for days, sometimes weeks at a time. It had interfered with everything else he had tried to do. The younger bard chuckled. It would be a long time before Ilsensine poked around in a god's mind again. Then he remembered the other mystery. "What about the questions?" he asked. "What were your questions? You looked disappointed by the answers."

Jedidiah was silent for a moment, then said "They only confirmed what I already knew in my heart. We'd better hurry back to the shop in case there's someone else searching for the hand."

The older priest pushed on into the fog. Joel hurried after him before the gloom could separate them.

Sixteen

The Hand Of Bane

Bits ushered them back into his shop with an air of expectancy. "Well?" he asked Joel.

"Holly's all right," Joel explained. "Her friend Bors found her. She's resting. Walinda has stayed behind to help tend to

her." "Walinda?" the bariaur queried with some surprise. "The unpleasant one?"

Joel picked up the sledgehammer Walinda had dropped on the floor of the shop. "Probably just trying to get out of the heavy work," he said, giving Dits a wink. He and Jedidiah made their way into the basement. Dits stood on the top step and watched them. Jedidiah pulled out the light stone and set it on a high step of the stairs so it shone down over their heads.

"Would you care to do the honors?" Jedidiah asked. Joel grinned. He took a firm grip on the handle of the sledgehammer and slammed it into the wall. "Whoa! That's hard," Joel said, his hands smarting. A chip of red had come off a brick, but there was no sign of cracking in the walls. "It feels like it's a lot thicker than it looks," the Rebel

Bard explained.

"Whack at it some more," Jedidiah said.

Joel complied, pounding on the brick wall several times before he noted a small crack forming in the mortar.

Jedidiah went at the crack with the pickax. Together they managed to pull a brick away.

There was a second brick wall behind the first. Mortar filled the space between the two walls.

"You don't think they filled the whole passage in with mortar and brick, do you?" Joel asked, worried that they might be banging on the walls for days, or even weeks.

Jedidiah shook his head. "Three walls maybe. That's the rule in Sigil, I've been told. Three of everything. Isn't that right, Mr. Dits?"

"Aye," the bariaur replied. "If three of something can't handle the job, it wasn't meant to be handled. If you'll excuse me, I'm going back to keep an eye on my shop."

They broke away the first wall completely, tossing the bricks into a corner of the basement. Joel noticed that the older man was pale and wheezing. "We'd better take a break," the younger man said, knowing Jedidiah would not

do so unless Joel joined him. They sat on the stairs, breathing heavily, wiping sweat from their brows.

"Are you all right?" the young priest asked.

"It's just the air. And being old. I hope," Jedidiah said.

"What do you mean, you hope?" Joel asked in alarm.

Jedidiah grinned. "Just a feeling I have that this city knows I'm really a god, and it wants to get rid of me."

After a few minutes Joel got up and began smashing away at the second wall. There was indeed a third wall behind it. Joel began smashing through the third wall before he'd finished dismantling the second.

A single brick fell backward out of the third wall, into darkness.

A cold draft surged out of the hole, stirring up the dust on the basement floor.

"I think we're through," Joel said.

Jedidiah picked up the light stone and went to Joel's side. He peered through the hole with the light stone held up beside his eye.

"Looks like a passage leading down," the older man said.

"Let's make sure we clear away enough stone so we can make a hasty exit should it be required."

They finished clearing away the second wall, then smashed at the third. The sound of the falling bricks echoed back at them, indicating a large room lay somewhere beyond. When they had cleared away the last of the bricks, a stone staircase of black granite yawned before them. Joel pulled out the finder's stone. The beacon pointed down the staircase.

"This is it," Jedidiah said, setting aside the pickax.

Joel leaned the sledgehammer against the wall.

Together the two men drew their swords and descended into the darkness below. Jedidiah held the light stone, Joel the finder's stone. They pushed aside the bricks that had fallen onto the steps. The stairs led to an arched passageway, which ran straight back toward a red glow.

They walked along the passageway side by side. Shiny black tiles covered the passage wall. Their surface appeared bubbly, like tar, but closer inspection revealed that each tile was a bas-relief carving depicting a different human face, each face screaming in silent, eternal pain.

"A motif only a Banite could love," Jedidiah muttered.

After thirty paces, the passageway opened into a huge circular room, its ceiling vaulted, its floor shaped like a bowl. Around the edges of the room, six braziers glowed with red light. Joel examined the two nearest the entry. They were filled with magically glowing light stones covered with a red oil. In the center of the room was an altar and a statue carved out of black granite. Both were polished to a high luster, which reflected back the red light.

The statue, a human-shaped creature, sat cross-legged on the altar. Its open mouth was filled with sharp teeth, and great horns protruded over its pointed ears. Two black gems sparkled in its earlobes, while another glittered from its forehead. A fourth, even larger, gem shone from a pendant on the statue's chest. Its hands were positioned in ritual signs Joel did not recognize. The face was smooth and youthful, and the flesh well muscled. It wore nothing but a loincloth.

"Is that Bane?" the Rebel Bard asked in a whisper. His voice echoed about the room.

"Probably some avatar he sent to some culture outside the Realms," Jedidiah said. "Handsome, but not the suave, sophisticated Bane we're used to, is he?"

Lying on the altar in front of the seated idol was a clawed hand the size of an ogre's paw, carved from obsidian. The hand's ebony fingers curled upwards. Its fingernails were carved from red garnets. Someone, as an afterthought to the artist's rendition, had studded the hand with diamonds. They gave the hand an odd look, as if it had the pox.

Jedidiah dropped to his knees to look under the hand to ascertain that it wasn't resting on a trap or a hidden device.

He and Joel exchanged looks. Jedidiah took a deep breath, then picked up the hand.

Nothing happened. No thunderbolts crashed through the vaulted ceiling. No secret traps caused the floor to swing open. No monsters leapt from hidden alcoves. Jedidiah nodded at Joel and exhaled.

Then the hand began to steam.

A thick white fog enveloped the carving and slithered away from the hand like a snake, wrapping around the intruders and the altar. The vapors carried the stench of decaying flesh. Hastily Jedidiah covered his mouth and nose and tossed the hand back onto the top of the altar. The fog continued to pour from the hand and began to fill the bottom of the bowl-shaped room.

With a start, Joel saw the stone idol's fingers begin to move.

"Jedidiah," the young bard whispered, pointing to the flexing digits. A moment later the arms swayed upward and stretched outward. Then, with a crack that echoed about the room, the statue's eyelids snapped open. Red fire blazed from the statue's eyes.

"This could be trouble," Joel noted.

"Big trouble," Jedidiah agreed as both men backed away from the altar toward the exit.

Something hissed behind them, and the light of the finder's stone flared brightly. Joel whirled about as Jedidiah remained facing the idol of Bane. From the braziers around the room's perimeter, steam had risen and coalesced into corporeal forms. Standing over each brazier was a creature much like the statue, with fangs and horns and pointed ears. Yet unlike the statue, they were not young and fair but ancient and decayed. Their eyes looked blank and dead. The flesh about their faces was withered and desiccated, and beneath their necks they were nothing but skeletons. Each was armed with a bone white saw-toothed blade. Two of

them already blocked the exit, while the other four were moving around the room's perimeter to join them.

Joel cast a glance over his shoulder. The idol of Bane had risen to its feet. It stood twice as high as a man, its head nearly touching the room's vaulted ceiling. While it moved slowly, this was no clockwork creature or golem. Its movements were neither clunky nor plodding but fluid and graceful. It was a stone warrior, powered by the hatred of an evil dead god and all his dead followers.

"I'll handle the big guy if you can take care of the six little ones," Jedidiah joked grimly.

"Oh, sure," Joel replied, amazed by the older man's bravado in the face of such overwhelming odds. Was it possible, Joel wondered, that Jedidiah had forgotten he was no longer immortal?

The young bard looked back at the skeletons. They made no movement to initiate combat, but instead merely blocked the entrance. With a flash of insight, the young priest realized that was their job. The privilege of killing any intruders belonged to the statue.

Joel climbed the sloping floor to meet the skeletons. Like the statue, the undead creatures were slow but graceful. Joel wondered if that was part of the magic that made them or if that was the way they'd been in life. The skeletons had the high ground, but that wasn't exactly to the bard's disadvantage. He swung at the lower half of the first skeleton's legs.

His blade smashed through the bones as if they were dried kindling. The undead creature fell to the ground and slid to the altar in the center of the room.

The second skeleton slashed its jagged blade across Joel's arm, tearing the fabric of the bard's shirtsleeve but fortunately missing his flesh. Joel tried the leg-breaking trick again, but this skeleton leapt upward with an unnatural grace, avoiding the bard's sweeping attack. As it came down, it sliced at Joel's left shoulder with its saw-toothed

blade. Joel could feel heat and pain radiating down his arm. The bard swung his sword backhanded, slicing through the vertebrae of the skeleton's backbone. The undead monster fell in two halves to the ground. Its bones slid down the curved floor to the base of the altar as the first skeletal guardian's had done.

Two more skeletons stood in the doorway, flanked by the last pair. Joel turned halfway to check on Jedidiah's progress. The bard was engaged in a hide-and-seek game around the altar, dodging the statue's stone fists. The older bard managed to slice at the idol with his sword, but the blade did not penetrate, leaving only a powdery white scratch on the granite hide. Joel thought of the sledgehammer sitting uselessly up in Dits's basement.

Then Joel saw the two skeletons lying by the altar. They were reforming in the mists gathered in the bowl of the floor. The shattered spine of the second and the broken leg of the first had both healed, and the skeletons were rising once more to their feet.

Joel turned back to the other four skeletons with a sinking feeling. He could feel blood trickling down his arm from his wounded shoulder. He knew he wasn't making progress this way. The skeletons would hold Jedidiah and him until they were exhausted. Then the statue would smash them to jelly. Unless he found some way to smash all six skeletons before they could reform. This would be the perfect time to call on Finder to turn the undead to dust, but Finder was no longer a god.

The irony grated on Joel. Now that he was finally confronted with the opportunity to turn undead like the priest he was, Finder could not grant him the power.

Or could he?

Joel was still a priest. Finder was still alive, in this very room. His godhood was stored in the stone Joel held in his left hand. The power that had created the skeletons was

dead. Figuring he had nothing to lose, Joel drew back from the skeletons. Ail six now gathered before the exit.

Holding the finder's stone high over his head, the Rebel Bard began the slow, rhythmic chant to send the undead back to their eternal sleep. The finder's stone glowed more brightly. Joel could sense power coursing through him, the power of his faith in Finder, not only what Finder represented as a god, but also the faith that Jedidiah the man would always be his friend. Joel's chanting grew louder.

The light from the finder's stone flared, filling the space about Joel with what seemed to be sunlight. The skeletons began to twitch in rhythm to Joel's chant. All at once, the undead raised their swords in salute. Then their bones rattled to the floor, the magic that held them together broken. Joel poked at a skull with his toe and it crumbled to dust. The rest of the bones decayed before his eyes in the same manner, the powdery dust wafting in the air. These skeletons would never rise again.

Joel spun around. Jedidiah was still evading the idol by dodging about the altar, but he must have taken at least one blow. His left arm hung limp at his side, and the light stone lay on the floor, crushed into several pieces, which now glowed dimly.

Joel dashed up the corridor, up the stairs, and into Dits's basement. The light from the finder's stone was now no brighter than a candle, but it was enough for the bard to locate the sledgehammer leaning against the wall. Joel sheathed his sword and grabbed the tool. He had just turned to head back down the stairs when something slammed into his back. The bard sprawled forward beneath the arched entryway. He lost his grip on the sledgehammer and the finder's stone. The sledgehammer went bouncing down the stairs, and the finder's stone rolled behind a pile of bricks.

The bard rolled over into a dark corner. In the dim light still cast by the finder's stone, he caught a glimpse of a large, dark shadow swooping upward, then turning. It was a

human figure with wings. Joel remembered Walinda had said the creature that attacked her in the street had swept down from above. He rose to a crouch.

The shadow sailed straight toward him as if it had no trouble detecting him in the nearly dark room. Its outstretched arms ended in talons.

Just as the flying creature was nearly upon him, Joel lunged forward, wrapping his arms about the creature's midsection. The momentum of the creature's flight shoved the bard backward, but he didn't release his grip. He and his assailant went tumbling across the floor.

The creature was too small and lithe to be Bear. It tried to rake at Joel's face with its talons. The bard grabbed one arm, then another, holding them back. The arms were covered not with fur, but with small, soft feathers. As they rolled on the ground, the creature's face came into the light.

Joel gasped. "Jas!"

The flyer butted her forehead into the bard's face. In surprise and pain, Joel released his hold on the flyer's arms. With one hand clutching his bleeding nose, he stepped back, but he did not draw his sword. His eyes remained fixed in horror on the winged woman.

Jas had undergone a horrible transformation. Her wings were like a gargoyles, the color of copper, tinged with a green patina, a change due to being in another plane. The rest of her body, though, had been malformed by some evil magic. Dark black feathers covered her skin. Her hands were twisted into razor-sharp talons. A crest of green feathers rose from her brow. Her eyes were larger and more rounded, and they glowed with a green light.

"Hello, Joel. Surprised to see me?" the woman snarled. "Thought I'd died in the desert when you abandoned me?"

"We didn't abandon you," Joel said, keeping his hands up to protect himself against any renewed attack. "We left you with Holly. She said you were all right."

"Holly," Jas whispered, her features softening for a moment. Then her eyes narrowed. "Holly was gone—you were all gone—when the priest and warriors of Xvim found me. They gave me a choice: death or transformation into a dark stalker. How could I resist the chance to take revenge on Walinda or the chance to hunt for those who betrayed me?"

"We didn't betray you," Joel said, his brow furrowing. "The banelich nearly killed you. We healed you and left you with Holly. She said you were safe. Something must have gone wrong. Holly wouldn't lie. Is that why you attacked her?"

Jas looked away. "I didn't realize it was her. I intended to attack Walinda. When Holly struck me, I turned and struck back instinctively. Walinda ran like the coward she is. I'll never allow you take the Hand of Bane to her. I'll kill you before I see her get what she wants."

"Jas, you can't be serious. I understand you want revenge on Walinda because she murdered your crew, but would your crew have wanted you to risk your life, risk your soul, to avenge them?"

Jas snarled and slashed out with a talon. Joel blocked it with his right arm. The talon sliced through his forearm, leaving a stinging cut from his wrist to his elbow.

"My soul was dead the moment I killed Holly," the winged woman screamed. "With her death, I'm trapped inside this form forever. According to the priest of Xvim, one death seals the bargain. Now I live only for vengeance."

"But Holly's not dead," Joel said.

"Liar!" Jas shouted.

"I'm not lying. She has a paladin friend who saved her. She's with him now."

Jas froze as if trying to take in Joel's words. Then her expression softened. "Holly's ... not... dead," she whispered slowly. The green glow faded from her eyes, revealing her brown irises. "She's still alive!"

Joel nodded. "Walinda's watching her until she recovers."

"You left her with that witch?" Jas growled. She stepped back and lofted herself into the air.

"Jas, wait!" Joel shouted, but the winged woman ignored him. She landed on the top step of the iron staircase and disappeared into the shop.

Joel took two steps toward the stairs, then heard someone shout behind him. It was Jedidiah, still trapped by the stone idol.

Joel snatched up the finder's stone and hurried down the stairs into the tunnel leading to the underground shrine. At the base of the stairs, he found the sledgehammer and retrieved it, then ran back to the shrine.

The idol made an effective wall standing before the passageway, blocking Jedidiah from leaving. Jedidiah stood before the creature, holding the Hand of Bane over his head. The magical stone statue had enough awareness not to damage the item it was created to guard, but neither was it going to let its thief pass by.

The creature had its back to Joel. The Rebel Bard took aim with the sledgehammer and swung it right at the statue's left ankle. The blow sent a crack running across the stone joint. The creature started to turn around, but its foot remained frozen in place. It wobbled, trying to balance itself on one foot and the stump of the other leg. Joel raised the sledgehammer again and swung it at the idol's opposite knee. The stone creature slammed Joel in the head with a rock fist before falling backward.

Joel dropped the sledgehammer and fell to his knees, stunned. He was just barely aware of Jedidiah slamming into the idol from behind and sending it crashing to the floor. The stone statue shattered into several pieces. The fragments did not move again.

Jedidiah stumbled forward into the passageway, still clutching the Hand of Bane. He was pale and wheezing, but grinning like a schoolboy. "Are you all right?" he asked Joel. "That was quite a blow you took."

Joel raised his hand to his head. He could feel a lump forming already. "I'm going to have a giant-sized headache," he replied. With Jedidiah's help, he was able to stand.

Slowly the two men walked back down the passageway, propping each other up.

At the base of the stairs, Jedidiah pushed the Hand of Bane at Joel. "Take it," he said.

"Why?" Joel asked, unwilling to touch the stone hand.

"I want you to make the decision of what to do with it," Jedidiah said. "Whether you choose to destroy it or exchange it for the other half of the finder's stone is up to you."

"Why?" Joel asked again. "Jedidiah, is this some sort of ridiculous test?"

Jedidiah shook his head. He leaned against the passage wall. 'The questions I asked the mind flayer... do you want to know what they were?'

Joel blinked with confusion, then answered, "Yes, of course."

"My first question was 'If I exchange the Hand of Bane for the other half of the finder's stone, will Joel still follow me?' You heard the answer in your head too didn't you?"

Joel nodded, then lowered his eyes. The answer had been No. He hadn't thought about what he would do if Jedidiah gave the banelich the hand. He had deliberately avoided thinking about how he felt about it since that first night in the Lost Vale. He looked back up at Jedidiah. "Ilsensine can't know that. It can't predict what I'm going to do."

"Joel, before I cast the spell to protect us from Ilsensine's probes, it was in your mind while you were unconscious, burrowing for your darkest secret. It knew what you thought. It knew what was in your heart. I knew what was in your heart, too, but I didn't want to admit it to myself. I want all my power back. I was a selfish mortal, and godhood hasn't changed that. If you weren't part of the picture ... but you are. I don't want to lose you as my priest, so I'm leaving the decision up to you."

Joel felt as if a heavy weight had settled on his heart. "What was the second question?" he asked.

"If I leave the decision up to Joel, will he act on my behalf?"

"And the answer was He does not know," Joel replied.

Jedidiah nodded. "The mind flayer left before I could ask it if it meant you or Ilsensine."

Joel shook his head. "I don't know what I'll do, Jedidiah. I don't want Bane to be resurrected. But it's not fair that you should be lessened just so he remains dead."

Jedidiah held out the Hand of Bane once again. He looked more than tired now. He looked ancient and haggard. He said, "Joel, I only became a god because several good friends demanded I fight Moander. One even gave his life to show me how an unselfish man dies. But I lived, and I was given the gift of godhood. I'm still not comfortable with it, just as you're not comfortable being a priest. I often wonder if the two aren't related somehow. If I'm going to remain a god, I need friends to show me the way."

Joel took the hand from his god. It was still warm from Jedidiah's touch. "I need to think about this ..." he said.

Jedidiah nodded. "Perhaps it will be easier to decide back at the Sensate safe house. Holly and Walinda will both have different answers for you."

"And Jas," Joel said suddenly. "She was here," he told Jedidiah. "The Xvimists captured her and transformed her like they did Bear. But when she learned Holly wasn't dead, she seemed to act a little more human. I think she's headed to see Holly."

"Let's go, then," Jedidiah said. "Before this city decides to spit me out."

They climbed wearily up both flights of stairs. Dits was among the stacks of books and scrolls speaking with a customer.

"I'll be back soon," Joel called, waving the Hand of Bane at the bariaur. Joel stuffed the hand inside his belt and left

the shop with Jedidiah at his side. They hurried through the streets of Sigil. Despite Jedidiah's age, it was Joel whose strength began to flag as they reached the Sensate safe house. The wounds he'd received from the skeleton's sword and Jas's talons throbbed painfully, and his head was pounding from the stone idol's blow.

Jedidiah ushered his wounded priest inside and sat him down in the parlor. "I'll go see if Bors can do that golden thread trick on you," he said.

Joel looked up at the picture over the mantelpiece and gasped. The picture had been slashed to ribbons. Lying on the mantel before it was a note written on a scrap of the painting's canvas.

Joel leapt up and grabbed at the document. He read it quickly and then ran from the parlor, shouting for

Jedidiah. He found the older man in the kitchen, leaning over Bors. The alien paladin had been knocked unconscious, apparently with a heavy frying pan.

Joel waved the note in the air. "It's from Walinda," he said.

Jedidiah rubbed at his temples. "Read it," he ordered.

"I have the paladin in my possession. I will be in the astral plane with my lord Bane. Bring the Hand of Bane if you wish to negotiate. Walinda of Bane . . . She has Holly!" Joel exclaimed.

"And you have the Hand of Bane," Jedidiah replied. "It's the same game, but the stakes have just been changed."

Seventeen

Lord Bane's Body

Bors soon regained consciousness. Aside from a ringing headache, he was no worse for wear. He sent a street urchin to fetch sedan chairs to take Joel and Jedidiah to the Shattered Temple, where they would find a portal to the astral plane. "I can accompany you as far as the temple, but then we must part," the alien paladin said. "I have an

obligation at the Civic Festhall that I can delay no longer." Jedidiah nodded, and Joel realized the old priest was relieved that Bors hadn't insisted on joining their party. Holly's presence had already complicated their business. Who knew what trouble a second paladin could start?

While they waited for their transport, Bors saw to their wounds. With a golden hammer, he applied a blow to Jedidiah's arm, relieving the numbness the older man felt, and with the golden needle, he pricked the bump in Joel's head. The swelling quickly subsided. Then he washed and bandaged Joel's wounds from Jas and the skeleton.

Two chairs arrived, each carried by two bariaurs. Bors instructed them to head for a tavern called the Soused Duck. The tavern, Bors explained, was as near to the Shattered Temple as any bearers would go. He wished them luck and sent them on their way.

As he rode, all Joel could think of was Walinda's treachery and how stupid he'd been to trust her. She'd pulled the same trick her master had tried. Jedidiah had even warned Joel about her in the Palace of Judgment. Of course, Jedidiah had also been tricked, believing Bors could protect Holly from the priestess.

Although it was now day, the fog grew darker as they approached their destination, and the air grew much more foul. Their bariaur bearers stopped at the Soused Duck tavern. The two priests alighted and paid for their ride. The bariaurs hurried away, and Joel could see why.

Beyond the tavern was a blighted scar where there had once been a thriving area of solid buildings. Several city blocks had been destroyed a long time ago but had never been rebuilt. Collapsed and burned-out buildings dotted the landscape. Some of the buildings had been scavenged, but no one chose to live in this place.

The Shattered Temple sat in the center of the devastation. When they had spoken yesterday, Holly had told Joel that the temple had once belonged to a god named

Aoskar, who had apparently made an attempt to control the city. The mistress of Sigil had destroyed Aoskar, his church, and his followers. The devastation remained untouched out of superstition and also served as a warning to all: Sigil was off limits to godly powers.

As Joel and Jedidiah approached the heart of the destroyed area, Joel grew aware of the quiet all around them. They had left the hubbub of the city behind. This area was a memorial to the dead.

The Shattered Temple sat on a low rise, surrounded by a small retinue of temple guards. Its roof and upper walls were gone. Its foundation had settled crookedly into the earth. At each corner was a half-raised tower. Graceful arched buttresses surrounding the temple held up only thin air. Any stone walls that remained standing were covered with thick, dark-leaved vines. Four paths led away from the temple in the front, the back, and to either side, down broad staircases. Each path ended in a broken and shattered terrace.

As they approached the nearest terrace, they were called to a halt by the temple guards. The guards were a motley lot. They were armed and armored in a haphazard fashion and wore no recognizable uniforms. They each wore a badge of the Athar, also known as the Lost—those who believed all gods were false.

The guards, while friendly, insisted that Joel and Jedidiah must wait for a guide to tour the ruins. Jedidiah paced the terrace while Joel tried to imagine what this place had looked like before its destruction. In a few minutes a tall, thin man, somewhat older than Joel, approached the terrace from the direction of the temple and spoke with the guards. Then he turned toward Joel and Jedidiah.

"Welcome to the Shattered Temple, headquarters of the Athar," the man greeted them in a gruff voice. "I'm Adenu, and I'll be your guide." Adenu turned and led the pair up the stairs toward the temple. The steps were uneven and

scorched, and where there were breaks in the stone, wild grass had taken root. Their guide continued his speech, his eyes half closed, as if he were reading it from the back of his eyelids. "On this tour, I'll be showing you all the darks uncovered by our leaders, darks which prove the wisdom of the Athar's teachings—the gods are charlatans, beings of false power and false promises."

Jedidiah began to chuckle.

Adenu shot the older man a chill look.

"I'm sorry," Jedidiah apologized. "I'm not laughing at your philosophy. It's just that the irony is killing me."

"Irony?" Adenu asked.

"It's not important," Jedidiah replied. "Sir, any other time I'm sure this tour would fascinate me, but right now we are trying to track down a girl and her abductor. The girl is tall, dark-skinned. Her abductor is a small, slender woman dressed in black. We have reason to believe that the woman would have used your portal to the astral plane."

"Oh, her! Bossy bit of fluff, the one in black was. Blew in here like she owned the place, demanding access as if she were the queen of the world. I thought that dolly-mop with her had too much of the bub."

"Did they go through the portal?" Joel asked.

"Her Majesty handed me a huge sack o'jink. Said she had to see the dead gods immediately—had to show them to the girl. Didn't see the harm in it. I guided them through to the astral side. Once we're across, the woman says she doesn't need a guide. She goes sailing off into the void with the girl in tow. I'm stepping back through the portal, and I'm nearly knocked over by some harpy who goes flying through."

"Jas!" Joel muttered to Jedidiah, who nodded in reply.

As they passed between two long, low buildings to the rear of the temple, Adenu said, "All of 'em lucky it's a good day for the portal."

"A good day?" Joel asked.

"Portal's getting unreliable," Adenu explained. "Like everything the so-called gods created. Some days it's no bigger than an egg. Other days it doesn't open at all."

Adenu led them through the front entryway to the ruined temple. The doors had burned away. Only their hinges remained. "Used to have caravans of people coming here to tour the temple," their guide explained, "all eager for that big finale—seeing Aoskar's body floating in the gray. Now that they know they may not see into the astral, they don't flock here like they used to. Portal closes down entirely, we'll be changing the tour itinerary. Can't say as I'll be disappointed. Thought from the beginning we should talk more about the tree."

"The tree?" Joel asked.

"I've gone and given you a dark," Adenu said. "Come back in a few weeks. The tree will be on the tour by then. Just working out some security problems. But the tree is proof there is a power greater than the gods."

Adenu led them through a door to the first tower on the right. Within, a knee-high wall encircled an empty pool about five feet across. Once the portal must have filled the pool, but now a puddle of gray in the middle was all that was left of the gateway to the astral plane. "Pop through there," Adenu said, "and you'll see 'em ... all the dead gods. No better than they should be. That's where they'll all end up once we've revealed the truth about 'em to the multiverse."

"Some even sooner than that," Jedidiah murmured. He turned to the Athar guide. "We'll find our way from here, thank you," the former god said. "It's been very interesting talking to you, Adenu. Farewell."

"Suit yourselves." He pulled back and watched them from the doorway.

Jedidiah stepped stiffly over the low wall. His face twitched, as if he were in pain.

"Are you all right?" Joel whispered. "I sense I'm not wanted here," the older bard said. Joel smiled.

"Not wanted in the city, I mean," Jedidiah explained. "Something or someone has sensed my presence and is not pleased. There's an oppressive atmosphere all around me. We're not leaving a moment too soon."

Joel stepped over the wall and joined Jedidiah beside the gray puddle on the floor.

"Hold on to my cloak and step through with me," Jedidiah said. "Stay relaxed, and don't panic when we reach the other side. Ready ... set... go!"

The two men hopped through the portal together. They fell into an empty sky. There was no ground beneath their feet, yet they fell no farther. There was neither up nor down, nor any horizon, nothing. In the distance, the sky looked silver, but close up there was no color to the air. Joel looked upward. The portal through which they'd entered looked like a leather-brown disk floating in the sky. It flared with a white light, then shrank to the size of a melon.

Beside him, Jedidiah's form looked pale, nearly translucent. Joel looked down at himself to discover that he, too, seemed less distinct. Yet when he patted his chest and legs, he felt as solid as ever, and the piece of Jedidiah's cloak to which he clung still seemed made of good, stiff wool. He released his hold on the cloak.

"Welcome to the astral plane," Jedidiah said. "The hallway to the multiverse. Don't be fooled by the emptiness. There's plenty here once you learn how to look for it. If you see any colored disks or snakelike tubes, avoid them. The disks are portals to other worlds, and the tubes are conduits between other worlds. With any luck, we won't run into any githyanki. That's a race of humans who worship a lich queen. They're none too friendly to outsiders. We need to find a temporary haven to start. See that gray spot?" Jedidiah pointed into the nothingness.

Joel shook his head.

"No? Well, I'm going to think about moving toward it, and when I do, I'll start to move in that direction. Just like

floating down a river. You think about moving toward me and you'll move along with me. Your mind does all the work. Watch."

Jedidiah looked out over the void and started to drift in the direction he had pointed toward.

Joel watched him recede with a hint of nervousness. The silence that surrounded him was far more intense and thus much more eerie than the silence in the Shattered Temple. He longed to hear another voice. It took the young bard a few moments to focus on imagining himself moving toward the older man.

Suddenly Jedidiah appeared to move backwards, toward Joel, but soon Joel realized it was because he was moving toward Jedidiah. Without any landmarks, without even the hint of a breeze, movement was very deceptive.

After a few minutes following Jedidiah, Joel could see the gray spot Jedidiah had indicated. A few minutes later the gray spot became a gray statue of a potbellied, ram-horned satyr with a sullen expression on its face. As the men moved closer, the gray statue appeared to be a huge rock carving, larger than a ship.

Jedidiah settled on the satyr's shoulder, and Joel landed beside him. The young bard felt only a slight sensation of weight holding him to the statue's body.

"Is this ... ?" Joel let his voice trail off.

"A dead god? Yes," Jedidiah replied. "I have no idea who it is. There are a great many of them out here. Some are newly arrived, while others have floated here for millennia,"

"Why are we stopping here?" Joel asked. While he was glad to feel something solid beneath his feet, the nature of the object he stood on made him feel uneasy.

"Now that we're no longer in Sigil, I'd like to have my godhood back. Would you be so kind as to restore it?"

Joel pulled out the finder's stone and held it out to Jedidiah.

The older man smiled and shook his head. "I can't just take it back by myself. It requires a ritual that only a priest can perform."

"What sort of ritual?" Joel asked.

"Well, it's different for every god. In my case, it requires a song ... one about the cycle of life."

"The tulip song," Joel said, realizing finally why Jedidiah had drilled him so assiduously in that particular song.

"Exactly," Jedidiah said. He lowered himself until he was seated cross-legged. Joel sat across from Jedidiah and held out the finder's stone. Then he sang, understanding much more about the song than he had before. As he sang, the process that had placed Finder's remaining godly power and abilities into this half of the finder's stone reversed itself. Mists of all colors of the spectrum streamed from the stone. The mists circled about Jedidiah's form, then were drawn into him, like water into parched earth. When at last Joel had finished, Jedidiah heaved a deep sigh and relaxed.

The weariness and age had disappeared from Jedidiah's face, and he once more appeared to be a man in his prime. More important was the feeling Joel had that he stood in his god's presence. The Rebel Bard hadn't recognized its existence until Jedidiah had given up his power, but now that the power was restored, Joel could feel it once again.

"Well," Jedidiah said, "what do you know? It worked. I can feel your presence again."

Joel's jaw dropped. "What do you mean, it worked?" he squeaked. "Why wouldn't it work?"

"Well, essentially, we just recreated a god, and there's other powers involved in recreating a godly presence—powers that might try to stop the process," Jedidiah explained.

"You knew that when you gave up your powers?" Joel asked, flabbergasted. Jedidiah nodded.

Joel sighed. Then he laughed. "I have a new portfolio for you, Jedidiah. God of Reckless Fools," he said.

Jedidiah laughed. "I like it. Something adventurers can relate to." He stood up, without a hint of pain or tiredness. "Time to deal with the banelich." "How do we find him out here?" Joel asked. "We just think of him, and our minds will move our bodies in his direction. Or you could think of moving toward Holly," the god instructed his priest.

Joel took Jedidiah's latter suggestion and found himself moving away from the dead satyr-god back into the void of nothingness. Jedidiah moved alongside him, though sometimes he soared ahead. Joel wondered if Jedidiah was thinking of the banelich or the paladin or concentrating instead on the other half of the finder's stone. Whichever was the case, they continued to move in the same direction.

Joel couldn't say how long their journey lasted. He didn't get hungry or thirsty or tired, yet he soon realized that time and distance and even his own existence were distorted in this plane. They passed writhing conduits and glowing portals and other dead gods. Once a flying lion circled them, then flew on.

All the while they traveled, the Rebel Bard was uncomfortable in his mind. Jedidiah had entrusted him with the Hand of Bane. The decision of what to do with it was up to him. Before Walinda's treachery, Joel's only concern had been whether or not he would deprive Finder of the power the god wanted, perhaps even needed. Now Holly's life was at stake as well. The priestess had taken Holly for the same reason the banelich had tried to abduct Joel. The banelich didn't want to part with the finder's stone. Walinda would demand the Hand of Bane in exchange for Holly's life, giving her master all he desired.

Another dead god statue seemed to move toward them. This one was of a handsome man wearing ornate plate armor, his face twisted and frozen in a derogatory sneer. As they grew closer, they could see that the statue was far larger than the first one. If this god were to land on any castle in the Realms, he would crush it beneath his great

mass. This, the bard sensed with grim certainty, was the body of Bane, former Lord of Strife, Hatred, and Tyranny.

Their quarry had taken up a position on Bane's great back, just below the neck. The banelich had discarded its armor and wore only a ceremonial robe of black and red. Walinda stood at the creature's right, armored in her black plate mail. Holly knelt at her feet, bound hand and foot. The priestess held the point of her silver-tipped goad against the paladin's throat.

Jedidiah and Joel settled several feet away from them, on the left shoulder, leaving a small hillock between the two parties. The hillock consisted of a ridge in the great god's armor corresponding to his shoulder blade. The banelich didn't deign to acknowledge their presence. Instead, Walinda spoke for her master.

"Well met, Poppin," the priestess greeted Joel. "I see you were successful." She nodded toward the stone hand Joel had tucked inside his belt. "I will make a deal with you ... the Hand of Bane for the paladin's life."

"What about our deal for the finder's stone?" Joel asked the priestess.

"My lord chooses not to surrender the power of the stone but to keep it for himself," Walinda replied. "Accept my offer and you may all live to witness my lord's resurrection."

"No!" Holly shouted to Joel. "Don't buy my life with this evil act! Destroy the hand!"

Walinda spun her goad, using the blunt end to smack the paladin in the back of the head, sending her sprawling forward.

Joel looked at Jedidiah. If he accepted Walinda's offer, Finder wouldn't regain the power stored in the other half of the stone. He would remain a weak god. Nor would Holly forgive him for aiding in Bane's resurrection.

"I gave you the hand," his god said softly to Joel, "so you could decide what was right."

The Rebel Bard fixed his eyes on Walinda. He knew the priestess wouldn't hesitate to kill the paladin. Holly was prepared to sacrifice her life to prevent Bane's resurrection, so the evil god couldn't return to the Realms to destroy the lives of others. Why should Holly have to die for all the others?

"I'm sorry, Holly," Joel said, "but your life is as valuable as anyone else's. I won't sacrifice it. I'll make the trade," he told Walinda.

Joel stepped forward, pulling the Hand of Bane from his belt. Suddenly he caught a flash of light out of the corner of his eyes. Jas, her wings as silvery bright as a new coin, swooped from beneath the god corpse's right shoulder just in front of Walinda and the banelich. She grabbed Holly by the arms and sped off with her into the void before any of them could react. The winged woman moved with a speed beyond anything her wings could achieve. She moved as anyone did in the astral plane, as fast as her mind could imagine, which in Jas's case was very, very quickly.

Walinda shrieked and swung her goad around to attack, but it was too late. She had lost her prize.

A moment later Jas returned, with Holly in tow, to land at Joel's and Jedidiah's side. "What took you?" Joel muttered. "I was waiting for you to distract the witch," Jas replied. The flyer's skin was still covered with black feathers, but her talons had transformed back to human hands. "You're changing back," Joel noted. "Slowly," Jas said. "The darkness of Xvim is still in me, but I can fight it now."

"Well played, priest of Finder," the banelich bellowed. Its deep voice rolled across Bane's back like the sound of thunder. "You have thwarted my priestess's scheme. Now you will trade power for power. The Hand of Bane for your stone."

"No!" Holly insisted, pulling at the Hand of Bane with her bound hands. "You can't do this! The return of your finder's

stone cannot outweigh the evil Bane will bring to the world if he is resurrected."

"Holly," Joel whispered, keeping a firm grip on the Hand of Bane, "you don't understand. There's more at stake than we told you. The power in the stone . . . it's Finder's power."

Holly shook her head. "That doesn't make any sense," she declared. "How could Jedidiah put Finder's power ..." The paladin halted in mid-sentence, and her face lit up with understanding. She turned to look at Jedidiah, her eyes wide with astonishment. Jedidiah grinned sheepishly.

Holly's eyes narrowed with sudden determination. "It makes no difference," she insisted. "Lathander personally sent a messenger to me. If you don't give me the Hand of Bane, if I don't prevent Bane's resurrection, will fail my god."

Joel felt a sudden surge of loyalty to Finder. "So I'm to fail my god instead?" Joel asked. "Is my god's weakness less evil than Bane's resurrection?"

"It must be," Holly said. "Lathander is a god of goodness and light. He wouldn't—"

"I'm waiting for your answer, priest of Finder," the banelich thundered.

Joel glared at the banelich. "Well, you'll just have to keep waiting," he snapped.

"Listen to me, Joel," Holly said. "Lathander wouldn't ask this if it weren't the right thing. Finder's power is not as important."

"Not to Lathander, maybe, but it means a great deal to Finder," Joel argued. "How do you know Lathander just doesn't want Finder to stay weak so he doesn't become a rival?"

"Lathander is a god of goodness," Holly growled angrily. "He wouldn't be so selfish ... unlike some." She turned and glared at Jedidiah.

"Hold on," Joel said. "Is this the Lathander who was ready to let you give up your life just now? Or back in the desert at Cat's Gate? It was Finder who saved you then. He saved us

all, even though it meant risking losing his power. He did it because I asked him to."

Holly stammered for a moment, then fell silent. She couldn't deny Joel's words. She released her hold on the Hand of Bane.

Joel knew now what he would do. Finder was as important to him as Bane was to Walinda and Lathander was to Holly. Who was to say that Finder's weakness would not ultimately be a greater evil than Bane's resurrection? Finder hadn't failed him. He wouldn't fail Finder.

"Banelich, we have a deal," Joel called out. He strode to the hillock between the two parties and stood, waiting.

Using its fingernails, the banelich reached up to its forehead and scratched away the thin layer of skin that covered the stolen half of the finder's stone. The undead creature ignored the blood that dripped down its face as it pulled the stone from its skull. "Take this to the priest, slave," he ordered Walinda.

Walinda laid her goad down before the lich. She bowed deeply, then reached out to take the finder's stone from her master's hand. As she did, the banelich grabbed her wrist with its free hand. Black fire poured from its hand and flared up the priestess's arm to her shoulder. Walinda fell to her knees, staggered by the pain.

"That is for failing me," the banelich snarled. "Do not fail me again."

Walinda rose slowly to her feet and backed away from the banelich several steps. As she climbed the rise toward Joel, her gait was unsteady. She halted on the slope just below Joel. The bard saw tears of pain and humiliation in her eyes. In spite of himself, Joel felt a pang of sympathy for the cruel woman. He held out the Hand of Bane.

The priestess reached out to take it with her left hand and thrust her right hand out toward Joel.

A fiery pain flared in Joel's stomach. He looked down at Walinda's right hand. Instead of the finder's stone, she held

the silver tip of the goad she had left lying before the lich. She thrust it deep into the bard's belly and gave it a twist.

Joel grunted as the priestess grabbed the hand from his grasp. With a cruel laugh, the priestess ran back to her master's side.

Joel fell forward, clutching at the weapon tip in disbelief. Darkness came over him in waves, then lifted. The bard was dimly aware of Jedidiah praying feverishly over his body and Holly leaning over him, stanching his blood with her hands.

Joel fixed his attention on Walinda and the banelich, but he seemed to see them from some other viewpoint—somewhere above them. He had an uneasy suspicion that meant he was dying, and it was his departing spirit that watched what happened.

The priestess of Bane knelt before the banelich, holding up both the finder's stone and the Hand of Bane.

"Accept these gifts, my lord," Walinda said, "so that you may be restored to greatness."

The lich snatched the finder's stone from her hand and set it back into its forehead. Then it held out both hands. Walinda set the Hand of Bane in the banelich's bony hands. The lich held it up over his head, the black stone and diamonds sparkling in the void. "Let me serve you in your glory," Walinda prayed. The banelich looked down upon the priestess, and the white light in its eyes flared.

"I will be your most humble servant, your slave, your voice to the faithful who will flock to your church," Walinda insisted.

The banelich slammed a fist viciously across the side of the priestess's face.

"Idiot woman!" the banelich growled. "You think I would deign to let one such as you serve me?"

Walinda looked up, wide-eyed with shock, blood streaming from her mouth. "My lord Bane, what have I done to displease you?"

"You exist!" the banelich snapped. "Did you think you would be Bane's chosen priest? You? A woman? Lord Bane will be served by me, the banelich who carried his essence. When I lived, Bane had no priestesses. From the essence I carry, I know that time will come again. You are nothing but a slave." The banelich kicked at the priestess's ribs. "Begone from my sight, you disgusting abomination!"

Walinda crawled backward, away from her master. Joel felt a dull ache in his abdomen and felt Holly's and Jedidiah's hands on him once more. "He's breathing again," Holly said. Joel turned his head and opened his eyes. The banelich stood facing the back of the godly corpse's head. He held the Hand of Bane high above his head and chanted harsh, guttural syllables in some ancient tongue. Bane's name was repeated over and over among the other words. Although he couldn't understand the words, when Joel closed his eyes, he could picture their meaning. The banelich was describing all manner of obscenities and atrocities committed in the name of Bane to glorify his power. It was the evil equivalent of Jedidiah's tulip song.

Jedidiah helped Joel to sit up, then rise to his feet. With Holly holding his elbow and Jas standing behind him, the bard stood beside his god. The banelich's voice rose to a fevered pitch. When it had finished its chant, it intoned Bane's name once, twice, three times. Then the banelich halted, waiting for the resurrection of his god.

Joel held his breath.

Nothing happened. There was nothing but total silence. The dead god's body did not stir.

Then Jedidiah laughed. His laughter seemed to raise a fresh breeze all around them.

The banelich wheeled about. "You dare mock the resurrection of Lord Bane?"

"There isn't going to be any resurrection the way you're going about it," Jedidiah said. "For one thing, you cannot serve as both essence and priest of the god in the same

ceremony. Even more importantly, you've been dead for centuries. It takes a living priest to resurrect a god. You just kicked away the only one at hand."

The banelich shook with rage. Joel thought for a moment it might attack Jedidiah. A few moments later the creature grew still. It held out a hand in Walinda's direction. "Come, slave," it said. "You may serve me once more."

Walinda wiped the blood from her mouth and rose to her feet. She approached the lich with a measured ceremonial step. She took the Hand of Bane from his hands.

"I don't believe it," Jedidiah muttered.

Joel stepped forward. "Walinda, don't!" he called out.

"Have a care, priest," the undead creature warned, turning his glowing eyes on Joel.

"Walinda, he's thrown you over once," Joel argued desperately. "He'll do it again. You heard what the banelich said. It holds the essence of Bane; it knows what Bane is thinking. The lich will be Bane's chosen. Bane will betray you."

"Ignore his prattling," the lich commanded. "Begin the chant that will restore to me my power."

Walinda raised the Hand of Bane over her head.

Bane will repay all your faithful service with nothing but abuse and betrayal," Joel warned. "Despite all my doubts, Finder stood by me, teaching me, helping me. Don't you think, for all your devotion, that you deserve as much?"

"Begin the chant!" the banelich said, its voice much sharper. "Begin it now!"

"Walinda," Joel said, "you worship power. To wield power is the virtue of your church. You told me there was no greater honor than to serve Bane as his slave, but you're wrong. You can be the woman who denied Bane power. If Bane is power incarnate and your actions thwart his desire, doesn't that make you stronger than he is? And if you are stronger, then why should you help him? You can serve yourself instead of him, and you will still know joy."

"Begin the chant!" the lich shrieked once more. "Speak my name!"

Walinda looked at the banelich, resplendent in his ornate robes, then turned and smiled at Joel.

She hurled the hand down with an unnatural strength. The ancient artifact fractured as it hit the back of the god's corpse, the fingers of the hand breaking away and scattering in all directions. The banelich screamed as if it were in pain.

"Thank you for the insight, Poppin," Walinda said. She wheeled to face the banelich. "Dead fool, know that it was by my hand that your god's power was denied. I will never utter his name again. May he rot in this plane forever!"

The banelich raised its hand, and a tongue of black fire sprang toward the priestess. Walinda had anticipated something like this, however. Using the power of her mind, she sprang upward, and the black flame passed beneath her and continued harmlessly off into the void. The lich raised its arms upward and hurled more flame after her retreating figure, but by then the priestess was a mere dot in the sky.

The banelich watched her retreating form with its bony mouth agape. Then it turned back to face Joel. "You!" it screamed. "This is your doing! Now you must die!"

The lich sprang at the bard with both hands outstretched, more dark flames wreathing his hands. Joel, still weak from his brush with death, was unable to move quickly. He stepped backward, but he tripped and fell as he did so. Jedidiah interposed himself between his priest and the lich. Grappling each other about the throat, the god and the banelich spiraled upward into the silver void. A black nimbus surrounded the combatants, a dark star that shone across the void.

Joel rose to his feet and launched himself into the air after the pair, but as he drew close, the coldfire repelled him with freezing pain.

Jedidiah reached upward with his right hand to grab at the finder's stone buried in the lich's skull. The banelich

grabbed at Jedidiah's wrist with both his arms. With both the lich's arms in the air, Jedidiah was able to lance out with this left hand and grab at the lich's chest beneath the robes.

Jedidiah tossed a small silver box in Joel's general direction . . . the lich's phylactery! The banelich shrieked incoherently. Joel chased after the box. Once he caught it, he willed his way back down until he landed once more on the god's corpse.

"Get back!" the Rebel Bard warned Holly and Jas. He laid the box down and drew his sword.

"Joel, no!" Holly shouted. "You could get yourself killed!"

Joel looked back up at Jedidiah, battling with the banelich, enshrouded with black fire. The bard smashed his sword down on the box.

The box smashed open, and blue flames billowed out in all directions. Joel felt a blast of hot air. Then everything went black.

Eighteen Renewal

Joel heard Holly calling his name. She was pleading with him to wake up. Jedidiah needed him.

Well, of course, Jedidiah needed him, Joel thought. That's how it is with gods. They need us, and we need them. He opened his eyes and blinked several times.

Everything was all silver around him. Holly's face came into view. She looked pale enough for light to shine through her.

"He's awake!" Holly cried out. "Joel, stay with us."

"I can hear you ... no need to shout," the bard said, but his voice sounded far off. He shook his head. "What—what happened?"

"When you destroyed the banelich's phylactery, there was a huge explosion," Holly said. "Look at yourself."

The Rebel Bard looked back down at his body. His tunic and shirt were burned to a crisp, and his skin beneath was pink as a newborn's—and painful to touch.

"I healed you as best I could," the paladin explained. She handed him half the finder's stone. "This fell from your shirt."

"What about the banelich?" Joel asked, sliding the gem into his boot.

"It turned to dust as soon as the phylactery was destroyed," Holly explained.

Suddenly Joel realized something was wrong. "Where's Jedidiah?" he demanded.

"You'd better come see," Holly said. She sailed off over Bane's body. Joel followed her, very slowly. He had a hard time concentrating.

Jedidiah lay with his head in Jas's lap. He was unconscious. His face and hands were terribly scarred, and his breathing was shallow and ragged. The god had his gift of immortality, but without the power to heal the grievous wounds the banelich had inflicted on him, Jedidiah might never recover. In his hands he clutched half of the finder's stone—the stolen half, which held the power that could restore to him all his godly abilities and, Joel hoped fervently, heal his wounds.

Joel knelt beside his god. Very gently he pulled the finder's stone from his hands. As if Jedidiah knew it was him, the god wielded up the gem.

Joel lifted his head and began to sing. His voice still sounded very far off, but he knew the tulip song well enough that it didn't matter.

The finder's stone began to glow softly, then to steam. Misty blue smoke writhed outward toward Jedidiah's body and surrounded him. Slowly the power sank back into its source.

Jedidiah's scars began to heal, and his breathing grew strong and steady. Without warning, his eyes snapped open.

"Lo," Jedidiah said.

"Hello, yourself," Joel replied with a smile. He handed Jedidiah the emptied half of the finder's stone.

"You might have been killed destroying that phylactery, you know," Jedidiah chided Joel.

Joel shrugged. "I might have lost my god if I hadn't," he pointed out.

"Where's Walinda?" Jedidiah asked.

"Did she ever come back?" Joel looked up at Jas.

"Who cares?" the winged woman muttered.

"She never returned," Holly said.

"What happened to the Hand of Bane?" Jedidiah asked.

Holly held up a leather sack and shook it. Its contents rattled like dried bones.

"That should make Lathander happy," Jedidiah muttered, sitting up slowly.

"Yes," Holly said. "I am to scatter the pieces about the multiverse," she said.

"Get that order in another vision, did you?" Jedidiah teased.

"Since my lord Lathander is not in the habit of posing as a feeble old adventurer, that is how he makes his wishes known. Yes," the paladin replied with a sassy tone. "My lord Lathander also wishes you to know that he thinks you are a reckless fool."

"God of Reckless Fools," Jedidiah agreed with a grin. "He could have popped in at any time to show me how I should have done it. Not that I would have listened, necessarily, but I'm always open to suggestions from the haughty and powerful."

Holly tossed her head and sniffed, but Joel didn't think she was really offended. Had she asked Lathander, the bard wondered, why it was Jedidiah who had to save her in the desert and not Lathander?

"And you, Lady Jas," Jedidiah asked, "do you have any criticisms you wish to share?" Jedidiah asked the winged

woman.

"I learned a long time ago not to mess with gods," Jas replied.

"But the gods have messed with you anyway," Jedidiah noted, stroking some of the feathers growing on Jas's face. "Perhaps I can remedy the damage Xvim's priests have done to you," he suggested.

"I think the darkness inside of me is something I have to deal with myself," Jas said.

"Very well," Jedidiah said, "but perhaps I shall check in on you sometime to see if you need a song to lighten your heart."

"I think I could tolerate that level of godly interference," Jas replied. "Maybe."

"Then I guess it's time I escorted you all back to the Realms," Jedidiah said.

Joel shook his head. "I need to return to Sigil," he said. "But I don't want you following this time. It's way too risky."

Jedidiah looked surprised and more than a little concerned. "Does—does this mean you're leaving me?" he asked.

"Only for a while," Joel assured him. "I thought I'd help Holly hide the Hand of Bane. Then I have another duty."

"Oh?"

"I owe the end of a story to a bariaur. When I've finished my tale, I hope Dits will tell it to others ... other priests and other gods. Maybe even the Athar."

"You'll have to tell it to me when you return," Jedidiah replied.

Joel grinned broadly. "You'll be able to hear it firsthand when I tell it in Sigil," he said. "I've restored your ability to sense what happens around your priests . . . around me."

"I know," Jedidiah said.

"But you still want to hear me tell the tale," Joel realized aloud. "You want to hear me say your name and tell people that I'm your priest."

"Yes," Jedidiah said with a sheepish grin.

"That's my purpose ... to strengthen you, as you strengthen me," Joel said. "A priest's purpose is not about being a slave to power as Walinda thought. It's a covenant about growing and renewing one another, god and follower both."

Jedidiah sighed and smiled. "Yes," he agreed.

"I understand now," Joel said, "I can accept that I'm your priest, without reservations, now and forever."

"And I accept the gift of your following with great joy," Jedidiah said. "Forever."

The Rebel Bard held out his hand.

On the corpse of a dead deity the god Finder clasped hands with his faithful priest.